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**The Perceived Impacts of Quality Audit on the Work of  
Academics  
--- A Case Study of a Research-Intensive Pre-1992  
University in England**

**Ming Cheng**

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance  
with the requirements of the degree of PhD in the Graduate School of  
Education, Faculty of Social Science.**

**Date of submission: May, 2008**

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Ming Cheng

December 2007

## Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out at the University of Bristol in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special references in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Signed *Ming Cheng*

Date *21/05/2008*

## Abbreviation

AAU	Academic Audit Unit
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals
DES	Department of Education and Science
DFE	Department for Education
ERA	Education Reform Act
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCs	Higher Education Funding Councils
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
NSS	National Student Survey
PCFC	Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
SBSs	Subject Benchmarking Statements
TQA	Teaching Quality Assessment
UFC	University Funding Council
UGC	University Grants Committee
VFM	Value for Money

## **Abstract**

This dissertation reports on how academics in one pre-1992 university in England perceive the impact of quality audit processes on their teaching and draws on data from 64 interviews with academics and a substantial documentary analysis. The study considers the close relationship between quality assurance mechanisms and a culture of quality audit, and how this relationship is perceived to impact on the work of academics. The analysis includes consideration of the effects of eight internal and external quality assurance mechanisms: peer observation, student course evaluation, annual programme review, approval systems for new and revised programmes/units, institutional audit, external examining, the 2005 UK National Student Survey, and the degree validation activities of professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies. The arenas of academic work examined cover undergraduate classroom teaching practice, academics' workloads, the curriculum, and power relations between academics and students.

The dissertation reveals that quality audit processes are perceived as the symbolic regulation of academic work, and that the English Quality Assurance Agency is believed to exercise hierarchical control over the case study university. Respondents held mixed views towards quality audit processes. One third perceived it as important in providing them with new paradigms to think about and improve their work through, for example, increasing awareness of the importance of good undergraduate teaching. This suggests that the process of quality audit has only resulted in bringing about a slight culture shift in relation to teaching, but the effect of QAA Institutional Audit upon the case study university, especially at the academic level, appeared to have weakened when compared with that of the QAA Subject Review period. Some respondents, however, showed resistance to quality audit processes and regarded it as an ineffective and bureaucratic practice. It was noted that there was a perceived tension between quality audit processes and the professional values of respondents. This tension exists due to some academics' negative perceptions regarding the time cost of audit, the bureaucracy it entails, and the distrust of academics it implies.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to My Thesis

### Section One: Rationale for the Research

My research explores how academics in England perceive the impact of quality audit processes on their work through examining a case study of a research-intensive, pre-1992 British university. The motivation behind my research lies in a strong personal interest in the quality audit movement in higher education in England. That movement is a main resource used by international students to judge the quality of teaching at a university. When I was applying for my MA courses in England in 2003, friends told me to choose the university according to its ranking by *Times Online* because they believed that a high ranking represented good quality and a good standard of teaching and learning. I followed their suggestion and chose one of the top ten universities ranked by *Times Online*.

When it was time to choose my Ph.D. courses in 2004, I realized the importance of the Subject Review score because the department where I had completed my Master courses was proud of its high scores in that assessment. Subject Review is an official resource used to judge the quality of teaching at universities in the UK. Thus I began to pay attention to the assessment results of Subject Review and related that standing to my Ph.D. application. It appeared that the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol achieved full scores on the Subject Review in 2001, so I moved to Bristol for my Ph.D. study. At the beginning, I found that study of teaching quality and quality audit processes had become an international trend since the 1980s because many countries have established their own national quality assurance agency to assure the quality of undergraduate teaching.

Considering the international trend of this quality audit, I became interested in two aspects, namely quality audit cultures and quality assurance mechanisms that were

related to teaching and learning in England. I wanted to find out the relationship between the quality audit and quality assurance mechanisms and to reveal how quality audit achieved its impact through these mechanisms. The quality audit culture refers to the growth of cultures in the higher education sector and the widespread use of quality assurance mechanisms and procedures to assure and enhance the quality of teaching within an institution. There were eight quality assurance mechanisms researched for this thesis. Four were internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution: Peer observation, student course evaluation, annual programme review, and the approval system for new and revised programmes and units. The other four were external mechanisms: the work of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England (QAA); external examining; the 2005 National Student Survey; and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The QAA took over the legislative responsibilities of the Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE) for subject-based teaching quality assessment as well as the audits that had previously been done by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) (Taggart, 2004). The QAA accomplishes this task by working with higher education institutions to define academic standards and quality; it carries out and publishes reviews in light of these standards from 1997 onwards (QAA, 2007). The QAA includes external examining and professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies in its code of practice, which provides a set of guidelines that identifies expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA, 2006c).

To explore the impact of the audit culture, I decided to analyze it from the perception of academics, to find out what academics thought of the quality audit and how that audit had affected their work efforts, particularly their teaching. There were several reasons for my interest in academic work in England; in particular my three - year university teaching experience in China caused me to be interested in studying the work of academics because academic staff are shapers of policy, or at the very least, interpreters of it. Academics also have an important role in maintaining and



enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Thus, there is a need to focus on what academics think of the quality audit processes and determine whether they have become enmeshed in its audit culture. I also wanted to use the research to contribute to the development of higher education in China. The quality audit system in England is better developed than that in China, so studying quality audit and its quality assurance mechanisms in England could conceivably benefit academics and universities in China in the future.

## **Section Two: Aims of the Research and the Research Questions**

The central purpose of my research is to interpret critically how academics perceive quality audit procedures and examine the perceived impact of quality audit on their work, as well as explain why there has been dissatisfaction about these quality audit processes among academics. Great emphasis has been placed on the close relationship between the growth of the notion of an audit culture in UK public services and its related quality assurance mechanisms (the mode and the purpose of these mechanisms and also the nature and extent of the mechanism activities). Additionally, emphasis has been placed on how quality audit achieves its impact through these mechanisms and the process for producing the critical analysis of how academics interpret their notion of professionalism in the context of such that audit.

Three main research questions are addressed in my dissertation:

***Research Question One:*** What perceived impact have the external quality assurance mechanisms, such as the QAA Institutional Audit, the external examining system, the control of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies over some teaching programmes and the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS), had on the work of academics?

***Research Question Two:*** What perceived impact have the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution, namely, peer observation, student course

evaluation, annual programme review and the approval system for new and revised programmes and units, had on the work of academics?

***Research Question Three:*** Do academics perceive themselves to be professionals? Is there a perceived tension between quality audit processes and the academic culture and the perception that academic work as a profession?

These three research questions were shaped by the literature review summarized in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, covering the interpretation of quality audit processes and cultures, recent changes to academic work, the impact of quality audit processes and cultures on the work of academics, and the interpretation of the terms, profession and professionalism. There are many academic research studies that have been concerned with the negative impact of quality audit. For example, Morley (2003) depicts the negative impacts caused by quality management from the perspective of academics. Harvey (2005) analyses the development of external quality management in the UK and its effects on higher education. Newton's (2000, 2002) empirical research studies explore how academics have viewed, responded to, and coped with quality monitoring, whether externally or internally driven. During this literature review, I notice that studies revealing views 'from the top' tend to lead to a somewhat partial and limited view of issues relating to changes in higher education institutions. These studies tend to be aimed at 'correcting' or implementing changes rather than just giving an account of the changes that are actually occurring. My research aims to present the different views held by academics regarding the quality audit process and analyse the possible reasons for why academics hold the views that they do, as well as to make recommendations on the future research on quality audit.

My theoretical framework adapts Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000), who criticised the external management, particularly that of Subject Review in higher education institutions in the UK in the 1990s. There still remains, however, a considerable gap to be filled regarding the regulation of the Institutional Audit, the successor process to the former Subject Review, on the work of academics. The post

2000 QAA Institutional Audit adopts a lighter review method than did the Subject Review. This change in the audit review method can conceivably affect the total impact of the quality audit. An in-depth study of numerous higher education institutions in England is beyond the scope of my dissertation, so my project presents one intensive case study of a single pre-1992 university in England, to produce an in-depth analysis of how research-active academics do think about the quality audit processes and cultures and their perceived impact on their academic work. The literature and documents reviewed for the research and the findings of the research are expected to provide new empirical material that will aid the overall understanding of quality audit processes and quality audit cultures in the British higher education sector.

### **Section Three: Framework for the Research**

The framework for this research refers to the five strands of thought explored in the literature:

- First, there has been a changed relationship between higher education and the Government of the UK since World War II and especially since the late 1970s (See Section 1.1 Chapter 2);
- Secondly, during the expansion of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s, Government higher education policies have particularly paid attention to the concepts of efficiency and accountability (See Section 4 Chapter 2);
- Third, there has been an evolution in teaching and academic standards quality regimes, especially from HEQC's need to explain HEQC, to the QAA whose role is better understood. Subject Review (which examined teaching and assessment in individual academic departments) and a separate institution-wide review of academic standards was replaced by a single process of Institutional Audit, which adopted a lighter touch overall review for academic institutions without the detailed inspection of academic departments (See Section 1.4

Chapter 2) ;

- Fourth, the resistance of academics toward the quality audit processes and the perceived negative impact of such processes on the work of academics (See Chapter 5);
- Fifth, debates on the nature of academic work and whether that can be regarded as a profession or not. This discussion relates to the definition of “profession”. (See Chapter 4)

#### **Section Four: Organization of the Dissertation**

My dissertation has eleven chapters. The first chapter discusses the theme of the study, reasons for the research, aims of the study and the research questions as well as the theoretical framework for the research. Chapter Two provides a review of the contextual factors surrounding the emergence and development of quality audit processes within the higher education sector of England and covers the following aspects: The changed relationship between the university sector and the UK Government and the expansion of higher education and its consequences; the changing role of the funding bodies for higher education institutions, the reasons behind that change and the consequences of the change; the evolution of quality regimes in England; the relevant higher education policies related to the expansion of higher education in terms of the concepts of ‘efficiency’ and ‘accountability’; and finally the introduction of new external quality assurance mechanisms imposed on educational institutions (in addition to the existing mechanisms such as external examining) and the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms within these institutions.

The discussion running from Chapter 3 to Chapter 5 looks at the views of academic researchers on quality audit processes and cultures, especially on the different interpretations of quality and its related terms in UK higher education institutions.

The debate on academic work as a profession, the relationship between quality audit processes and the development of new managerialism is key, as is the value tensions that academics face during the process of quality audit and the academic debates about the significance of individual quality assurance mechanisms on their work.

The design of my research is presented in Chapter 6. First, I illustrate the overall features of my interpretative paradigm and then identify the rationale for preferring a single case study. The research questions and the rationale for the case study are also identified. I report on the methodology for my data collection and how that process was perceived to have related to the research questions. The data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and also any ethical issues arising in the course of the research are discussed. Finally I outline how I analyzed the data and the reasons behind that process.

My results findings are presented and analyzed in four chapters, Chapter 7 through Chapter 10. Chapter 7 describes respondents' attitudes toward their workload and examines whether academics' heavy workload is related to the quality audit. Chapter 8 presents how four individual external quality assurance mechanisms were perceived to have affected the work of respondents at the case study university. Chapter 9 examines how four internal quality assurance mechanisms were perceived to have affected the work of respondents at the case study university. Chapter 10 compares these respondents' perceptions of the external quality assurance mechanisms with their perceptions of the internal mechanisms and assesses the extent to which the quality audit was perceived as affecting the work of respondents. The work of academics that is explored in these four chapters covers academic views about undergraduate classroom teaching practices, curricula, and the power relation between academics and students.

The conclusion of this dissertation appears in Chapter 11 where I first draw together the overview of findings and then explain how the findings answer my research

questions. Then I compare my research with previous research to suggest in what way my research adds value and perception to the topic. Next, I reflect on my research process and present the merits and limitations of the research. Finally, areas for future research into quality audit processes are highlighted specifically.

## **Chapter 2: Context of Quality Audit in England**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the contextual factors underlying the emergence and development of quality, quality audit processes, quality assurance mechanisms, and audit culture within English higher education. Firstly, I draw on the literature to reveal the changing relationship between the university and the Government since World War II. Secondly, the expansion of higher education and its consequences are presented. Thirdly, I examine the changing role of the funding bodies for higher education institutions, reasons behind their change and consequences of this change. Fourthly, I focus on the evolution of quality agencies, especially the QAA. Fifthly, I analyze relevant higher education policies in the expansion of higher education, particularly the concepts of 'efficiency' and 'accountability'. Sixthly, I introduce the external quality assurance mechanisms imposed on the higher education institutions and the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution. The mode and the purpose of these mechanisms, together with the nature and extent of these mechanisms are described and analyzed. This chapter thus provides a conceptual overview of Government policies towards quality and quality audit followed by a focus on the political intentions that underpin various strategies used to implement reforms in the higher education institutions of England.

### **Section one: Contextual factors in the rise of quality and quality audit**

This section examines the impact of the changed relationship between the Government and higher education on the funding and management of the higher education sector, such as the establishment of the quality regime and the requirement of efficiency and accountability. It reveals that the UK Government aims to increase returns on public investment in higher education, and that there is a strong desire for

universities to drive the economic development of society. The requirement for efficiency and accountability can be seen as an external control by the Government over the higher education sector, through which the universities are expected to become productive and to provide high quality education.

### **1.1 Changed relationship between universities and Government**

There are two key concepts in this part: State and Government. The idea of 'State', adopted from Salter & Tapper (1994), essentially means the political dimension of the State during a particular time period. It also conveys the interaction of political and bureaucratic institutions which may incorporate the input of societal interests (for example, the important pressure groups in higher education) at particular points in time. However, due to the limited scope and scale of this dissertation, it is impossible to review the wider literature on the changing role of the State in civil society, so this part focuses on the relationship between the Government and higher education. The concept of 'Government', which appears in this part, refers to a particular Government, such as 'Mrs. Thatcher's Government' (the Conservative Government 1979-1990) and 'the Government of Blair (the New Labour Government, 1997-2007).

The changed relationship between the Government and higher education is explored according to the evolution of the funding bodies for higher education: 1919-1989 (University Grant Committee); 1989-1993 (Universities Funding Committee); and 1993 till now (the Higher Education Funding Council for England). The relationship has shifted from sponsorship-dependency relationship to Government as an investor in higher education. (For details see sections below)



### **1.1.1 Sponsorship-dependency relationship**

Salter & Tapper's (1994) analysis of the publications from Government, Parliament, and the funding bodies reveals that there has been a shift in the balance of power between universities and the State since 1919. One reason is that the UK Government realized the vital importance of the universities after the two world wars and intended to have a radical expansion in science and technology to meet the needs of the economy. Salter & Tapper (1994) call this the economic ideology of higher education and see it as a way for the State to exercise control over the higher education institutions. The universities thus became increasingly financially dependent upon the Government from the late 1940s. 'The effect upon the proportion of universities' income received from the University Grants Committee (UGC) was marked, rising from 36 per cent in 1938-39 to 60 per cent in 1947-48' (Salter & Tapper, 1994, p. 131). In this situation, the Government's approach to higher education shifted from 'an exchange relationship to a sponsorship-dependency relationship' (Henkel & Little, 1999, p. 17). However, under the regime of the UGC, the Government allowed the universities to retain strong control of their own territory, such as the distribution of academic appointments and rewards, developing, transmitting and accrediting knowledge and evaluative criteria (Henkel, 2000).

Since the 1980s, there has been a trend for the Government to exert more control over public expenditure on higher education. The first drastic reductions in funding for universities occurred in 1981. There were substantial reductions in the unit of resource for both universities and polytechnics during the following years. The university chose to reduce their intake in response to the cuts in 1981, while the polytechnics seized the opportunity to expand (Henkel, 2000). In the academic year 1987-88 the UGC allocated just under 1.7 billion pounds to 44 universities (Taggart, 2004).

The Education Reform Act 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act 1992

changed irrevocably the relationship between the higher education institutions and the State. The Government increased its control over the funding, planning and management of higher education (Salter & Tapper, 1994). For example, from 1988 to 1993, the universities were funded by the University Funding Councils (UFC). The government also removed polytechnics from local authority control in 1988 and created the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Committee (PCFC) in the Education Reform Act 1988. The polytechnics and colleges of higher education were funded by the PCFC between 1988 and 1992 (Brown, 2004). The PCFC allocated 1.1 billion for 84 polytechnics and colleges in 1989-90 (Taggart, 2004). These changes suggest that the Government was no longer a provider of funds but became an investor in higher education, and it wanted the UFC to deliver national priorities and a mass higher education system, but not at an elite system price (Taggart, 2004).

### **1.1.2 Government as investor of higher education**

In similar vein, Scott (1995) argues that the Government began to see themselves as the purchasers, on behalf of taxpaying citizens, of a range of teaching, research and consultancy services. For example, in order to promote efficiency through competition among providers, there was the development of internal markets in which contracts are made between purchasers - the Government or its agents, and providers of various teaching, research and consultancy services - universities and colleges. This changed relationship has had a direct impact on higher education in two areas: the control exercised by Governments over higher education institutions, and the funding of these institutions. For example, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the binary line (the distinction between universities and polytechnics). The rationale behind this Government policy is: 'The real key to achieve cost-effective expansion lies in greater competition for funds and students. That can best be achieved by breaking down the increasingly artificial and unhelpful barriers between the universities, and the polytechnics and colleges.' (HMSO, 1991,

p.12) In the same year, the UFC and the PCFC were replaced by the unified Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE) under the 1992 Act. The HEFCE is a funding body of higher education as well as a regulatory body. This is achieved through its power to attach conditions of grant to funding, and through its power of accountability (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

The Government does not have the power to allocate funds to any particular institution or subject area, because the funding is allocated by the HEFCE, which receives all its funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), but the Government does have power over the HEFCE in two aspects (Taggart, 2004). One is that the DfES sets the overall funding levels for higher education. The other is the DfES sets the HEFCE running costs which affect its ability to grow as an organization to set and deliver on its own agenda. This suggests that the Government acts as an investor of higher education, and that it does have the power to set the overall funding levels and an overarching framework for policy development in higher education. The power relationship is translated by HEFCE into the higher education sector (Taggart, 2004).

## **1.2 Expansion of higher education**

Together with this changed relationship, the expansion of higher education took place in the UK. The expansion of the number of students and higher education institutions, and the consequence of this expansion will be analyzed in this section.

The first wave of expansion happened between 1963 and 1975. In 1945, the UK had a small university population, catering for three per cent of the school-leaver age group, but from 1945 to the early 1970s, expansion resulted in a five-fold expansion to 15 per cent. The number of universities increased from 24 to 43 between 1945 and 1967 (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). In this phase of expansion, the material standards of

what the universities provided were rising. For example, an increasing number of students were being accommodated away from home and staff ratios improved from 1:10.2 in 1939 to 1:8.6 in 1952, and then to 1:7.2 in 1957. However, the resulting increases in the cost led to more control over resources by the Government (UGC, 1958).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a dynamic growth of a second wave of expansion of higher education. The number of universities in the UK increased to 105 in 1997. The number of school leavers entering higher education rose to 32 per cent in 1995 (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). The expansion has carried on since the 1990s. According to a DfES (2003) report, *The Future of Higher Education*, 43% of 18–30 year olds would participate in higher education in 2003. The Government aims to increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18–30 by 2010 (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). This suggests that widening participation has become a key element of Government policy for higher education. There are two main reasons for the Government's interest in this expansion. One is the strong demand for graduates. Research shows that 80 per cent of the 1.7 million new jobs needed by the end of the decade will recruit those with higher education qualifications. The other reason is because the UK participation rate of 43 per cent of 18–30 year olds is lower, according to OECD comparisons, than in many other developed countries (DfES, 2003).

### **1.2.1 Consequences of expansion**

However, some researches critique that the expansion has not produced the culture change which is normally associated with a mass system (Scott, 1995). Despite the quantitative indicators which suggest that British higher education is now a mass system, in qualitative terms it still feels like an elite system because many practices in British universities remain rooted in an elite past, such as an enduring commitment

to a research culture, selective entry, specialized academic disciplines, high student retention, and high academic standards (ibid). Although there is a lack of culture change, according to Scott (1995), the expansion has caused changes in the following ways.

The first change is the view of the Government towards higher education. During the first wave of the expansion, there was a predominant view that higher education was an investment good because individual rates of return were high. Higher education was thus acknowledged to be a public responsibility because everyone would benefit from investment in higher education in the long run, not only those who participated directly. However, during and after the second expansion, higher education began to be regarded as consumption good. The view for regarding it as a public responsibility weakened. This expansion was accompanied by a decline of distinctively graduate careers (Scott, 1995).

The second change is that the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 marked a major reshaping of UK higher education (Scott, 1995). The polytechnics grew bigger and politically stronger in both the local and national contexts (Henkel, 2000), because they become universities. Meanwhile, the end of the binary system made the previously autonomous universities respond to forms of central regulation which had applied to the polytechnics and other non-university institutions but not to them (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

The third change is the standard of provision (Scott, 1995). The ratio of full-time students to full-time university staff rose from '8.1 to 11.2 between 1971/72 and 1989/90' (Halsey 1992, p.99). In the pre-1992 universities this ratio rose from 9.5 in 1981/82 to 14.0 in 1993/94, whilst in all universities in the unified sector, this ratio reached 17 in 1994/95 (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

The fourth change is that institution grants plus fees for full-time equivalent students

in the UK fell between 1995/96 and 1998/99 from 4904 pounds to 4305 pounds per student, a drop of 12.2 per cent (Taggart, 2004). This drop was higher in England (at 12.8%) than in Scotland (10.3%) or Wales (8.1%) (AUT, 1996). Meanwhile, the expenditure on higher education rose by around 45% in real terms between 1976 and 1996-97, but fell by about 40% for each student over the same period (Dearing Report, 1997).

The fifth change is that academic salaries suffered considerable attrition when compared with those of comparable groups (Taggart, 2004). The Association of University Teachers (AUT) pointed out that whilst university salaries remained unchanged in real terms from 1981, comparable groups had seen increases from between 18 and 50 per cent. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), using different bases of comparison, observed that while university teachers' pay grew by 8.6 per cent in real terms between 1961 and 1993, non-manual male workers in general saw their pay increase by 37 per cent (Dearing Report 1997, p.32).

To summarize, the expansion of higher education has so far resulted in the fall in the unit of resource, the worsening of staff-student rations, and reduced pay in real terms for academics. The changed relationship between universities and Government has made the higher education institutions become far more vulnerable to political interventions. The responsibility for managing and regulating higher education has thus been placed on the funding bodies for the higher education institutions.

### **1.3 The changing role of the funding bodies**

In this section, a description and analysis of the funding bodies for higher education institutions will focus on those in England, such as the University Grant Committee (UGC), the University Funding Council (UFC), and the Higher Education Funding

Councils for England (HEFCE). A simple chronological history of these funding bodies is listed in Appendix 8.

### **1.3.1 University Grant Committee (UGC)**

The UGC was created by the Government in 1919 and lasted seventy years. It was perceived as a 'buffer' organization between the Government and the universities, characterized as a partnership based on mutual dependence, and it tried to keep politics out of the funding allocations to individual higher education institutions (Brown, 2004; Salter & Tapper, 1994; Scott, 1995; Shattock, 1994; Taggart, 2004). The UGC is seen as a rational planner in its approach to the management of the university sector, particularly in the early 1980s, and its development is divided into four periods: 1919-1945, 1945-1963, 1963-1979, and 1979-1989. (Taggart, 2004)

#### **1.3.1.1 UGC 1919-1945**

In the period of 1919-1945, the UGC was seen as a funding body to distribute grant income to institutions. Its members were drawn primarily from the higher education sector (Taggart, 2004). The role of the UGC in this period was essentially 'reactive' to the demands from higher education institutions, and it did not have a role in defining the activities of the institutions supported through its funding (Shattock, 1994). Instead the UGC reacted to the pressure either from the Government or the University. There was a partnership of convenience between the UGC and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). Both of them worked in partnership to persuade the Government that the HE sector needed more funding to maintain the quality of research, and to support the growth in student numbers (Shattock, 1994).

### **1.3.1.2 UGC 1945-1963**

In the period 1945-1963, the UGC did not play the role of mediator between the Government and the University (Taggart, 2004) because the Government was willing to provide ever increasing funding to the universities (Shattock, 1994). The UGC operated as an intermediary between the Government and the universities. It explained the needs of the sector to the Government while keeping the institutions content with their annual allocation of grant funding (Taggart, 2004).

### **1.3.1.3 UGC 1963-1979**

According to Salter & Tapper (1994, p.198), 'from the 1960s onwards the UGC appeared to be subjected to more explicit political direction, and more amenable pressure from the State'. The effective cut of the unit of funding per student gave the UGC no alternative but to allocate the funds it received and to accept the grievance of university staff (Taggart, 2004). By the mid-1970s, the system of planning university funding some five years in advance collapsed. As a result, the university system became vulnerable to changes in the political climate (Shattock, 1994), and the UGC was no longer seen as in tune with the needs of the times (Shattock, 1994) because when the UGC tried to maintain elite traditions and parallel funding levels, this created a tension between the Government's aim to reduce public expenditure and unit costs. The Conservative Government thus felt that the UGC could not manage the higher education system and moved it swiftly towards the mass higher education model (Taggart, 2004).

### **1.3.1.4 UGC 1979-1989**

The period 1919 to 1979 was a period of growth in higher education with the expansion fully funded (Taggart, 2004). However, the arrival of the 1979 Conservative Government reversed that trend. It was committed to reducing



Government expenditure on education, increasing efficiency, and redirecting the educational system further towards the needs of industry (Scott, 1995). In the period 1980-81 to 1983-84, the cumulative effect of the cut of grant for home students plus the withdrawal of subsidy for overseas students led to an 11% reduction in universities' general income. Meanwhile, there was substantive reduction in income from the UGC to some institutions (Taggart, 2004). These changes together with hyper inflation during the 1970s made it hard for the UGC to provide appropriate management for the expansion of higher education from the 1980s onwards. As a result the UGC moved from its position as a broker to an all-powerful arbitrator of funds to the university sector (Taggart, 2004). However, after the massive Government funding cut was enacted in 1981, the Government still saw the universities as inefficient, wasteful and unresponsive. One measure by the Government was to commission an examination of the role, structure and staffing of the UGC (Scott, 1995).

The Jarratt Committee was established by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) in 1984 to give guidance and advice to universities on strategic planning in the context of Government cuts in the funding for the higher education sector (Taggart, 2004). This committee was seen as a safety valve put in place by the CVCP as the representative body for the universities (Scott, 1995). The Jarratt Report (CVCP, 1985) pointed out that the UGC needed to be proactive in the new policy environment, and that the higher education system needed a new focus on leadership and vision to cope with the management of change in higher education. It meant that the universities needed to bring the functions of planning, resource allocation and accountability together with a corporate planning process. However, the report cast doubt on whether the UGC would carry out its roles in promoting and encouraging good management practice.

Following the Jarratt recommendation there was a review of the UGC, mainly on its constitutional position and role in relation to the Government and the universities, on

its internal structures and working methods, and its secretariat. This review was undertaken by the Croham Committee appointed by the Government and was established in July 1985, with its result published in 1987 (Taggart, 2004). The Croham Committee supported the UGC as an intermediary body on the grounds that the Government required independent policy advice from a professional expert organization. However, the committee was worried that the UGC was unable to take action in respect of the financial performance of an institution. One concern of the committee was the failure of the UGC to spot the financial crisis at University College Cardiff, which led to its collapse (Shattock, 1994). This was an important factor in the downfall of the UGC. The committee recommended that the UGC should be reconstituted as a University Funding Committee and that it should have a substantial proportion of non-academic members on its governing council, in order to let it represent the wider national interest (Croham, 1987). The Government accepted the recommendation from the Croham Committee and announced in the 1987 White Paper 'Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge' that it would establish the Universities Funding Council (UFC) as a new funding body for higher education (DES, 1987).

### **1.3.2 University Funding Council (UFC)**

There were two funding structures for higher education in the period 1989-1993: the UFC for the university, and the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Committee (PCFC) for polytechnics. Both the UFC and the PCFC were created by the Education Reform Act 1988 and dissolved in 1993 under the provisions of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (Scott, 1995).

The UFC provided funding for the university sector in the UK from 1988 to 1992, with its independence enshrined in legislation, but it was more accountable to the Government than the UGC (Taggart, 2004). There is a perception that the UFC was

established by the Government to manage and control the higher education sector and to exercise control over public investment in higher education (Scott, 1995). Similarly, Taggart (2004) regards the UFC as a regulator of the Government investment in the higher education system, as well as a purchaser of teaching and research from the university on behalf of the Government.

According to Taggart (2004), the establishment of the UFC was an important step in transforming the funding body from a provider of grants (UGC) to a regulator and manager of the higher education system (UFC and HEFCE). Taggart (2004) argues that although the life of the UFC was short, lasting just five years, the UFC is significant in some aspects: first, it established the tradition that the funding council became an agent of the Government and that the Council should operate within the overarching framework of Government funding and strategy for higher education; second, it established a new type of relationship between the Government and the higher education in that the Government became an investor in higher education; and third, it attempted to introduce market forces into the funding for teaching (Taggart, 2004).

However, Scott (1995) points out that the UFC embodied subordination and a loss of autonomy, because in its early beginning, the UFC was guided by, and operated within, the context of the 1987 White Paper '*Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*', which aimed to develop a higher education system that would effectively meet the needs of the economy. The Government proposed an increase and widening of participation in higher education, more selectively funded research, greater links between higher education institutions and industry, and an emphasis on measuring quality and efficiency in teaching and research (HMSO, 1987). This suggested that funding was no longer unconditional, but provided for specific activities and deliverables, and that the Government had moved from being a provider of funding to higher education institutions to being an investor in higher education.

The UFC chairman, Lord Chilver, encouraged institutions to bid against each other in order to drive down unit costs. The allocation of the additional student place was based on a bidding competition. This meant that if an institution bid below the offer price and was able to persuade the UFC that this would not lead to a decrease in quality then the UFC would allocate the institution a greater share of the available student places. Lord Chilver's remarks about making students contribute to the cost of their tuition increased the universities' sense of alienation, and the UFC was thus seen as an arm of the Government (Scott, 1995). However, the higher education sector did not co-operate with this bidding process. In 1991, the UFC abandoned its strategy of seeking competitive bidding for all student numbers and restricted the bidding competition to the margin of growth in numbers. Meanwhile, the universities were encouraged to attract fees-only students (Taggart, 2004).

### **1.3.3 HEFCE**

The 1991 White Paper '*Higher Education: A New Framework*' proposed a single funding structure for higher education institutions, and the creation of separate funding councils for higher education in England, Scotland and Wales (HMSO 1991). In 1992, the Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and Funding Council for Wales (FCW) were established. The HEFCE replaced both the UFC and the PCFC by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which enshrined the legal independence of the HEFCE from the Government (Salter & Tapper, 1994). The basic theory underlining the creation of HEFCE was that the higher education institutions in the UK had to become both more efficient in their use of resources and more responsive to the needs of the economy (Brown, 2004).

There are different interpretations to the role of the HEFCE. The HEFCE sees itself as a mediator and buffer organization between the Government and the higher

education sector (Taggart, 2004). However, there are different views from the higher education sector. Brown (2004) argues that the structural changes of the funding councils have marked a subtle dilution of institutional autonomy, with the HEFCE losing its buffer role and acting more or less directly as an agent of the Government. Taggart (2004) holds a different view that the HEFCE works as a mediator between the DfES and the higher education institutions, because the HEFCE is more accountable to the DfES than its predecessors, the UGC and the UFC. Taggart describes HEFCE as 'a guide dog for the Government and the higher education sector' (p.79), which absorbed the demands of the Government over the past decade and used the power of financial regulation to exercise control and influence over the higher education sector. For example, the DfES sets the levels of funding for activities within the overall funding for teaching and research. The HEFCE seldom opposes the wishes of the Government, except for its lack of attention to the wishes of the Government to link funding for teaching to teaching quality assessment (TQA). The reason why the Council adopted TQA is because the Rt. Hon John Patten MP, the secretary of State for Education, suggested that the HEFCE could use the former Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), which was used for the polytechnics sector before the abolition of the binary line between polytechnics and universities, to assess teaching in the universities. This proposed method was refused by the HEFCE (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). Instead, the Council adopted Teaching Quality Assessment and had the power to withdraw funding from any higher education institution where quality had been demonstrated as unsatisfactory (HEFCE 1993).

Based on an analysis of the HEFCE annual reports, Taggart (2004) argues that the HEFCE has actually become a regulator and manager of higher education through its financial power because if an institution seeks to disregard the conditions of the HEFCE grant, then it stands to lose funding. Kogan & Hanney (2000) share a similar view that on most occasions, the HEFCE can be perceived as a policy development and policy implementation body for Government strategy in support of national areas of priority. However, Taggart (2004) argues further that although the HEFCE

regulates the higher education sector, it cannot be seen as a planner of higher education for two reasons. One is because the HEFCE does not have the legislative power to direct funding to specific regions of the country to address a shortage in the provision of higher education. Its funding method was based on historical allocations plus a competitive bidding process whether for teaching or research. The other reason is that the HEFCE does not have the power to plan the activities of the higher education institutions. All the institutions are partly funded by the HEFCE, except the University of Buckingham, the UK's only private university, which receives no funding from the HEFCE. Therefore, the council uses its policies and funding to regulate and influence the activities of the higher education institutions.

The literature indicates that there are some further differences between the HEFCE and the UGC. According to Taggart (2004), one difference is that the HEFCE is an agent of Government, not a buffer body like the UGC, so the role of the HEFCE is to regulate and to fund institutions against their own strategic plans rather than to impose any system-wide pattern of development, but the HEFCE needs to approve institutional development plans (*ibid*). Another difference is that the HEFCE can anticipate the financial crisis of the universities more quickly than the UGC. For example, the HEFCE annual reports for 1995-96 revealed that the higher education sector was in serious financial difficulty. Brandon Gough, the Chairman of the HEFCE, noticed this looming crisis and warned that if urgent offsetting action was not taken, the higher education sector as a whole would 'move from a wafer-thin surplus into deficit in 1996-97' (HEFCE, 1996, p. 1). In contrast, the UGC failed to see the crisis coming when the University College Cardiff was in financial difficulty in the 1980s (Shattock, 1994). This suggests that the HEFCE recognizes these financial crises more quickly because the HEFCE has strong finance and audit departments in place to monitor the financial health of institutions, while the UGC did not (Taggart, 2004).

Graeme Davies, the Chief Executive of the HEFCE in 1994, felt that because the

higher education institutions had received large amounts of public money, the independent higher education institutions were becoming increasingly accountable for their actions (HEFCE, 1995). According to Taggart (2004), there are two explanations for this view. One is that Davies was irritated by the way the Council felt it had been treated over the introduction of the Teaching Quality Assessment exercise. The other is that Davies wanted to make the HEFCE effective. Later on, the TQA was moved out of the HEFCE to an independent body – the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This was seen as a tactical move by the HEFCE, because there was no sympathy for the TQA system in the HE sector and the close association between TQA and the HEFCE would sour the relationship between the Council and the higher education institutions (Taggart, 2004).

#### **1.4 Development of the quality regime**

The QAA as a quality regime was established in 1997. Its development can be dated back to the time when the university system was under pressure to address the quality of teaching, but the CVCP was determined to retain as much autonomy as possible and established an Academic Standards Group, chaired successively by senior vice-chancellors, first by Philip Reynolds and then by Stewart Sutherland (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). Following the Reynolds Report (1986), the CVCP set up codes of practice on the maintenance and monitoring of standards, including external examining and arrangements for postgraduate training and research (Reynolds Report, 1986). The pressures for teaching quality to be assessed included not only ministers' and officials' concerns but some in the academic community who feared that if research was assessed, but teaching was not, even greater emphasis would be given to research (Cave, *et al.*, 1991).

As a result, in the 1987 White Paper the Government stipulated that the quality of teaching in higher education institutions should be evaluated. There should be: '...

systematic arrangements for ... staff appraisal; evaluation of the results achieved, including analysis of external examiners' reports and students' employment patterns; ... and a feedback from students themselves (DES 1987, para.3.12). The White Paper went on to suggest that the quality of teaching needed to be judged by reference mainly to students' achievements. The 1991 White Paper was more assertive about quality assessment of teaching:

*While recognizing that the precise arrangements will be a matter for the Funding Councils themselves, the Government considers it important that assessment of quality should continue to inform the funding decisions of the new Funding Councils. This is already the case with the PCFC and the UFC... the role of the assessment units will be for the Funding Councils to determine in consultation with institutions and subject to guidance from the Secretaries of State (DES 1991, para 79 and 83).*

In the view of Brown (2004), the 1991 White Paper included proposals for a new quality assurance regime which for the first time brought the regulation of all institutions' teaching and learning activities within an overall statutory framework. The proposed dual quality assurance regime consisted of an assessment by the HEFCE of the quality of teaching and learning in institutions; and second, audit by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (CDP) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) of institutions' quality control mechanisms. The HEQC was responsible for undertaking academic quality audits of higher education institutions in the UK, and the academic audit referred to external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place (HEQC, 1994). According to Brown, the creation of the quality audit, the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), and the associated machinery in the HEFCE and the HEQC, were part of the fundamental shift in the relationship between the Government and higher education.

The Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) started in 1993, and was carried out by the Quality Assessment Division (QAD), part of the HEFCE (Taggart, 2004). The TQA



was an external review of and judgments about the quality of teaching and learning in institutions. It was conducted by subject peer reviewers, with departments of the higher education institutions graded as excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory (Taggart, 2004). However, there was increasing criticism of the cost and the bureaucracy of the TQA, as well as growing resentment in the university system towards the TQA, quality audits, and increased accreditation activities by other professional and statutory bodies (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). This, together with debate between the HEFCE and the CVCP, government pressure and threats that the schools inspectorate, OFSTED might have its role extended into higher education, finally led to the establishment of the QAA in 1997 (Taggart, 2004). The replacement of the HEQC by the QAA suggests that there is a lack of stability in the various quality regimes since 1992. Brown (2004) argues that it is mainly because of continuing disagreements between the Government, the funding council and the institutions about the purposes, coverage, form and ownership of quality assurance, especially the issue of what is the best means of protecting the quality of student learning.

There are different arguments used as to how an institution's arrangements for maintaining academic standards are best protected. One is that quality is best protected by institutions competing against one another for students and income. The main drivers of this view are efficiency in the use of resources and the need to match provision to requirements. The external assurance through assessment is thus focused on teaching and learning at subject/programme level. Another is that quality is best protected by an institution's own quality arrangements. The third is that external quality assurance is needed to benchmark standards at a national level/across the sector. Correspondingly, there is an emphasis on the collection and publication of information about quality and standards.

## **Section 2: External quality assurance mechanisms**

Except for the Institutional Audit by the QAA, there are several other external quality assurance mechanisms for monitoring quality, of which the external examining system, accreditation of programmes by professional and statutory bodies, and, since 2005, the National Student Survey are covered in this research study. This section includes a description and analysis of these mechanisms, mainly on their mode, purpose, and the extent of their activities. The mode refers to whether these mechanisms are carried out by the academic community collectively, by the Government or by an agency under its control, or by a combination of these means. The purpose means whether the mechanism aims primarily at improving institutional effectiveness in teaching and learning, or at improving the efficiency of the resources used for teaching and learning. The activities of these mechanisms mainly deal with academic standards, academic quality, and academic quality assurance.

### **2.1 QAA**

This section looks at the work of the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA), mainly its Institutional Audit and its Academic Infrastructure. From the view of the UK Government, the QAA serves as an instrument in national higher education policy making and provides information on the quality of education (Taggart, 2004). It took over the legislative responsibilities of the HEFCE for subject-based teaching quality assessment as well as the audits that had previously been done by the HEQC (ibid). The QAA aims to safeguard the public interest in respect to sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. The QAA does this by working with higher education institutions to define academic standards and quality, and it carries out and publishes reviews against these standards. The Agency publishes reports on most of its review activities (QAA, 2007).

### **2.1.1 Institutional Audit**

In England, the current review method by the QAA is Institutional Audit which was introduced in 2002-03 for a transitional period of three years, during which all higher education institutions in England were to host an Institutional Audit. In 2002-03 and 2004-05, 70 institutions participated in audits. In England, the first full programme of Institutional Audits was completed in 2005. Thereafter a six-year cycle became the norm (QAA, 2005).

#### **2.1.1.1 Objectives of Institutional Audit**

An objective of Institutional Audit is to contribute to the promotion of high – quality in teaching and learning’ (QAA, 2005). The audit process has five main phases: preparation, briefing visit, audit visit, audit report, and mid-cycle follow up. The audit assesses the quality and standards of teaching and learning at subject level and ensures that the higher education institutions are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and are exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner. The audit focuses on ensuring that the quality assurance systems of the institution are in place and are working effectively to maintain academic standards and quality and on validating the information published by the institution (QAA, 2006a).

The QAA puts a great emphasis on academic standards and academic quality. Academic standard is a way of describing the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award which is at a similar level across the UK (QAA, 2006a). While, academic quality is explained by QAA (2006a) as a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their awards. It aims to ensure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them. The QAA has made it clear that the

basic notion of its emphasis on academic standard and academic quality is that the institutional quality assurance would be judged against academic infrastructure which has evolved from recommendations about quality and standards made in the Dearing and Garrick reports in 1997 (Taggart, 2004).

#### **2.1.1.2 Academic Infrastructure**

The Academic Infrastructure provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education, of which practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education are included in my research and analyzed below.

##### **2.1.1.2.1 Subject benchmark Statements (SBSs)**

According to QAA (2006b), the benchmarks, together with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, programme specifications, and a code of practice, are a means of making explicit the nature and level of academic standards in higher education. The development of SBSs was one of a set of linked recommendations of the Dearing Report of 1997. All the SBSs were written by a group of academics and other specialists from the subject area. The Statements suggest what a first degree means to different subjects, and sets out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They are seen as providing academic staff and institutions with a point of reference in the design and development of degree programmes and a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes.

##### **2.1.1.2.2 Programme Specifications (PS)**

Another important part of the code of practice produced by the QAA is the programme specification (PS) which is a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme, and the means by which

these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. In the view of QAA (2006b), the PS is intended as public information to students and parents as well as is directed primarily to the academic audience: teaching staff, those involved in quality assurance, external examiners, professional bodies and statutory regulatory bodies. The QAA believes that the PS can help higher education make sure that designers of programmes are clear about the intended learning outcomes, in terms of knowledge and understanding, skills and other attributes. In designing first degree programmes and creating the PS institutions will be expected to use the information produced by SBSs. It is intended that the benchmarking information acts as a general check point against which the institution's outcomes and processes can be referenced.

#### **2.1.1.2.3 Code of practice**

The Code of practice provides a set of guidelines which identifies expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA, 2006c). This Code is seen as central to the overall quality framework promoted by the QAA (McGhee 2003). Administratively, it links the Framework for Higher Education Qualification, subject benchmark statements and Institutional Audit. Politically, it reflects the authority of the agency to lay down an agenda for quality assurance, but acknowledges the autonomy of institutions to address the agenda according to their own mission and local circumstances (Harvey, 2005). The code of practice covers ten sections, including external examining, which has historically been seen as independent of quality assurance.

## **2.2 External examining**

The external examining system is a major feature of higher education in the UK and a key mechanism for ensuring that standards are maintained and comparable across higher education. There is an expectation that external examiners can act as

independent and impartial advisers providing institutions with informed comments on the standards set and student achievement in relation to those standards (Silver, 1995).

### **2.2.1 Development of external examining**

The introduction of external examining in this section is based on Silver (1995). According to Silver, the origin of external examining can be traced back to 1832 when the University of Durham was established. The external examiners were additional examiners to help with the setting and marking of examinations. The purpose of the University of Durham using Oxford examiners was to confirm to the outside world that their degrees were of a comparable standard, so from the beginning of external examining one implication has been a statement about standards. By the 1880s a further expansion in the number of universities was accompanied by a requirement that examinations should be conducted by internal and external examiners. External examiners were then used as part of judgments about the standards of courses.

According to Silver (1995), external examining developed slowly in British universities in the nineteenth century and was firmly established by the end of the twentieth century. It was associated with the discipline-based honours degrees and adopted by institutions newly entering higher education, with an intention of demonstrating their credibility and standards. In the 1950s the system became part of the operation of Colleges of Advanced Technology associated with the award of the Diploma in Technology by the National Council for Technological Awards (NCTA), and from 1965 those which came under the umbrella of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) for their degrees and other awards. The CNAA regulated the procedures for the appointment, involvement and reporting of external examiners in its polytechnics and colleges of higher education.

Both the CNAA and the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) (now Universities UK (UUK)) had in the 1980s issued guidelines for the appointment and involvement of external examiners. The CVCP in 1984 described the appointment of external examiners as persons of sufficient seniority and experience to be able to command authority, but this qualification was dropped later. After the CNAA disappeared following the 1992 Education Act, the HEQC in 1994 set out the procedures and priorities by which institutions might ensure that they operate an effective system for external examiners. This suggests that the role of the external examiners becomes more complex with the changes in the traditional structure of higher education (HEQC, 1994).

### **2.2.2 The role of external examiner**

Although the traditional role of the external examiner is as an additional marker, increasing student numbers have moved the external examiner towards the role of 'moderator', in which capacity they scrutinize assessment procedures, sample student work, and become involved at the final stage only in relation to the most difficult and controversial individual cases. In some institutions, the role of the external examiner has been extended towards an advisory or consultancy and review role, advising on the creation of new units and programmes (Silver, 1995).

In the view of Brown (2004), the external examining system is turned into a national system, because of the strong and continuing interest from the HEFCE. One example, Brown quoted is that the funding council asked the Cooke Committee in 2002 to look at ways of promoting better training and development for external examiners, particularly through some form of accreditation to promote higher standards and to develop over time a form of college or academy of accredited external examiners. The Committee produced the Cooke report which recommended that the external

examiner can hold a public assurance role by providing public information about standards through a summary report publicly available (Cooke Report, 2002). Furthermore, the QAA (2006d) regards external examining as an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance, and specifies that there are three main purposes of external examining: to verify that academic standards are appropriate for the award or part thereof which the external examiner has been appointed to examine; to help institutions assure and maintain academic standards across higher education awards; and to help institutions ensure that their assessment processes are sound, fairly operated and in line with the institution's policies and regulations. This suggests that external examining has become part of the quality assurance system, and that the core role of the external examiner has become that of assuring the quality of assessment processes and maintaining academic standards. According to the QAA (2006d), institutions may ask external examiners to undertake other activities, such as, making comments on assessment practices at modules; advising on the comparability of the examining process across a range of programmes, the procedures for the classification of degrees; and being responsible, to some extent, for modules spanning different programmes.

In the code of practice produced by the QAA, external examining is linked to subject benchmarking, the national qualifications frameworks and institutional programme specifications, all of which are part of the publicly available information that supports judgments on academic standards and quality assurance procedures (QAA, 2006d). This reveals that the external examining system has been internalized within the institutions.



### **2.2.3 Terms of comparability and standard**

There are two key words in the purposes of external examining: standards and comparability. The notion of comparability carries with it an assumption about identifiable standards. According to Silver (1995), the principal support for external examining as a means of comparing standards remains at the level of the subject. Silver regards comprehensive and cross-subject comparison as impossible because only comparison with similar courses across institutions is possible.

The belief in a common standard of award has provided the justification for the UK external examining system (Barnett, 1992). However, the idea of a common gold standard is argued to be a fiction because standards are subjective and elusive (Silver, 1995). Silver's (1995) project examines the effectiveness and future of the external examining system, and reveals that most respondents believe that standards are actually the outcome of a collaborative activity, a consensus in which the various perceptions of internal and external examiners, within a regulatory framework, result in the implementation of a standard appropriate to the course and to the institution. This reveals that there is a link between institutional aims and expectations and the role of the external examiner, and that the external examiners play a variety of roles in establishing and maintaining standards by helping the individual institution to be aware of what others do and to enforce its explicit standards.

To summarize, the external examining system helps the institutions to ensure that the academic standard of each award and its component parts is set and maintained by the awarding institution at the appropriate level, and that the standards of student performance are properly judged against this. But how about programme validation and curriculum accreditation? Who is responsible for those? The following section will answer these questions.

## **2.3 Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB)**

According to QAA (2006), the curriculum of higher education has never been part of the Government's concern or under central control, except in certain areas of professional preparation where the professional bodies validate the curriculum. Where a higher education institution offers vocationally orientated degrees it is likely to engage with a wide range of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. In the case study university analysed in this thesis there are a number of vocationally oriented awards which are accredited by a range of PSRBs, for example, the British Computer Society (BCS). These are introduced in the section below.

### **2.3.1 The British Computer Society (BCS)**

The British Computer Society is the qualifying body for Chartered Information Technology (IT) professionals. Established in 1957, and incorporated by Royal Charter in 1984, the BCS is licensed by the Engineering Council to award Chartered Engineer status (CEng) and Incorporated Engineer status (IEng); and more recently by the Science Council to award Chartered Scientist status (CSci). Its objects are to promote the study and practice of computing and to advance knowledge of and education in IT for the benefit of the public (BCS, 2006).

### **2.3.2 Importance of PSRBs accreditation**

What is the purpose of PSRBs? According to the QAA (2006e), the PSRBs offer the only means of obtaining a license to practice a particular profession. In other words, admission to membership of a PSRB is taken to demonstrate the attainment of a particular range of occupational and professional skills. Hence, accreditation of a higher education programme by a PSRB may exempt graduates of the programme from further examination or assessment for membership, and give access to a licence

to practise. QAA Institutional Audit relates closely to the PSRB by taking into account its report.

### **2.3.3 Institutional oversight of reports from PSRBs**

According to the QAA (2006e), the information from the 70 Institutional Audit reports published by November 2004 demonstrated that institutions engage constructively with PSRBs relevant to their provision, particularly at subject level. One positive view is that the process of accreditation by PSRBs can lead to valuable feedback on a range of issues of interest to the institution as a whole as well as those particular to the specific subject area. A number of audit reports noted that PSRBs reports were integrated with the institution's quality processes. For example, the PSRBs report informed the annual monitoring process, and a progress report on the actions following from PSRB comments formed a part of the annual monitoring report. However, many audit reports indicated that the primary responsibility for engaging with the PSRB was given to departments, schools or faculties with, in a few cases, a degree of central oversight. Several audit reports expressed concerns that there was little evidence of institutions using PSRB reports in their quality assurance processes. It was recommended that institutions should review the way in which they engaged with the PSRB accreditation process in order to ensure institutional oversight and consider any strategic implications in PSRB reports (QAA, 2006e).

To summarize, the PSRBs, like external examining and Institutional Audit can be seen as important processes of the external quality audit. Except for these external quality assurance mechanisms, the National Student Survey (NSS) has become another important process of the external quality audit.

## **2.4 National Student Survey (NSS)**

What is the NSS? The NSS is a national initiative across all publicly-funded higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The HEFCE is responsible for this survey. According to the HEFCE (2006a), the NSS aims to gather the feedback on the quality of students' courses, helps inform the choices of future applicants to higher education, and contributes to public accountability. Results from the NSS are regarded as an essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education. The HEFCE commissions Ipsos UK to undertake the survey which was piloted and tested during 2003 and 2004 at 23 higher education institutions. The first full-scale survey, across more than 140 higher education institutions, took place in 2005. Results of the NSS are published on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) web-site.

### **2.4.1 Background of NSS**

Why was the survey conducted? According to the HEFCE (2006a), a revised quality assurance framework for higher education was developed following the completion of Subject Review by the QAA. A Task Group was set up to recommend what information the new framework should generate. The group consulted on proposals (HEFCE 01/66), and concluded (as set out in HEFCE 02/15) that an essential element would be consistently gathered and student feedback published through a new national survey. As part of a new framework for assessing the quality of higher education and providing information to the public, a national survey of students took place across all higher education institutions in UK during 2005.

### **2.4. 2 NSS methods**

What are the methods of the NSS? According to the HEFCE (2006b), the 2005 NSS covers all publicly-funded higher education institutions in England, Wales and

Northern Ireland and nearly all full-time and part-time undergraduate students registered at these higher education institutions during their final year of study. The survey uses a range of electronic, postal and telephone methods, including email questionnaires and the use of mobile phones. The 2005 NSS questionnaire focuses on six dimensions of teaching quality by using 21 individual questionnaire items. In addition, a measure of overall satisfaction with the course of study is also included, making a total of 22 questions responses to which are quantitatively analysed.

- Teaching and Learning (Questions 1-4).
- Assessment and Feedback (Questions 5-9).
- Academic Support (Questions 10-12).
- Organisation and Management (Questions 13-15).
- Learning Resources (Questions 16-18).
- Personal Development (Questions 19-21).
- Overall satisfaction (Question 22).

In the view of the HEFCE, the survey is expected to help students choose where to study. How the survey has influenced the actual teaching of academics will be presented in the findings chapter.

### **Section 3: Internal quality assurance mechanisms**

Together with the external quality assurance mechanisms, there are internal quality assurance mechanisms used by the higher education institutions to assure and enhance quality and standards. These mechanisms vary, depending on the individual institution mission, size, curriculum structures and other factors. My case study university uses a series of quality assurance mechanisms to maintain quality of teaching and learning. In my case study university, the primary responsibility for quality and standards mainly resides in academic departments, although there is a balance between 'central control' and 'departmental autonomy'. In other words, the

learning and teaching committee within my case university oversees quality assurance, while the devolved responsibility for areas such as programme approval, monitoring and review, student course evaluation, and peer observation are carried out within the departments/schools.

### **3.1 Annual Programme Review (APR)**

Annual Programme Review was formally introduced in 2001 in the case study university and is carried out within the individual department/school. It aims to improve the quality of the programmes offered by my case university. It requires that each year a department gathers feedback on all of its programmes, from external examiners, students, departmental staff and external organisations. Reflections or reports on individual units are taken into account, together with statistical information such as student progression rates and the proportion of degrees awarded in the different classes. All these elements are then discussed in a departmental meeting, and a brief summary report will outline the positive features of the programme and any action to be taken.

### **3.2 Approval of New and Revised Programmes and Units (ANRPU)**

In order to ensure that any changes made to units or programmes, or any new units or programmes, are academically appropriate and sound, and that sufficient resource can and will be made available to ensure their successful delivery, my case university requires that all changes to units or programmes must be approved by a formal process at department and faculty level. The ANRPU was formally introduced in 1994. New programmes, major programme changes, new and changed mandatory units are also approved by the University's Validation Group which reports to the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

### **3.3 Peer Observation**

According to my case university, peer observation is a formative process and a learning experience for both those observed and observing. Peer observation was formally approved by the university in 2005. One main purpose of peer observation is to create the space and opportunity for those being observed and those observing to reflect on their teaching. There are guidelines on peer observation, requiring that all departments / schools should operate a system of peer observation of teaching, with at least one formative observation of each core member of teaching staff, as identified by the Head of Department / School, during any two year period.

### **3.4 Student course evaluation**

My case university is aware of the significance of feedback arrangements to the experience of students as learners, and uses it as a key component of its quality assurance mechanism to make sure that the voices of students are heard in its quality management and academic standards arrangements. There is a system for gathering, analysing, responding and acting upon feedback from students. Guidelines for feedback from Students were formally introduced by the university in 1994. Students are invited to complete a questionnaire for each unit they take in the case university. The evaluation forms are mainly electronic and paper ones. The format and contents of the evaluation varies within the departments and schools.

## **Section four: Accountability and efficiency in higher education sector**

The above quality assurance mechanisms, together with the funding councils and the quality regimes, aim to effect public accountability and efficiency within higher education institutions. Meanwhile, accountability is articulated and regulated through the work of these statutory bodies, and funding was used to achieve Government policy aims through a series of special initiatives.

## **4.1 Accountability**

The 1991 White Paper wanted the institutions to make more effective responses to the increasing demand for higher education benefits for individuals as well as for the economy and society as a whole, so the Paper emphasized that the main responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning should rest with each individual institution. The paper also claims that 'there is a need for proper accountability for the substantial public funds invested in higher education' (DES, 1991, p.24). It believed that the publication of the HEFCE assessments of the quality of teaching in institutions would stimulate competitive behaviour in and between institutions, and that the institutions would become sensitive to market demands and needs.

## **4.2 Efficiency**

Together with the requirement for accountability, there is a demand for higher education institutions to become efficient. The requirement for efficiency in UK higher education has undergone three phases: efficiency as bureaucratic-rationality, efficiency as more for less, and efficiency as economy (Johnson, 2000a)

### **4.2.1 Efficiency as bureaucratic-rationality**

In 1984, the UGC asked the CVCP to make arrangements to reduce inefficiencies of traditional modes of work and organization in the university. In response, the Committee reported that universities could improve their efficiency and effectiveness in planning and the use of resources. For example, the efficiency would be improved through a rational frame of management and by empowering administrators in decision-making, planning and resource allocation (Jarratt, 1985).



#### 4.2.2 Efficiency as more for less

Later on, the 1987 White Paper extends the definition of efficiency to more for less, because the Government felt that it was no longer sufficient to improve efficiency through reducing waste, and that it was necessary to produce more out of the system:

*The pursuit of efficiency is not just about saving money. It is about helping institutions and individuals to achieve more of what they should achieve with the money that is available.... The Government has a role in seeking to ensure that suitable arrangements to promote and monitor efficiency are in place for institutions and for different parts of the whole system (DES 1987: 3.23).*

The Paper advocated market derived financial incentives such as contracts and encouraged entrepreneurial income generating activity. It assumed that marketisation would provide more stimuli to institutions to innovate and to find a particular niche in a more competitive HE market (Henkel & Little, 1999). Marketisation can be interpreted at two levels. At the system level, it refers to Government policies to build up a market-like culture and resource allocation systems, whereas at the institutional level it refers to competitive behaviour that has been stimulated between and within institutions (Bargh *et al*, 1996).

The higher education institutions were thus under pressure to do more for less. They began to incorporate the values and mechanism of the market into their organizations and to reduce their financial dependence upon the State. The universities were encouraged to compete for industrial partnerships in research and teaching, for commercial funding, for consultancies, and for new students' (Henkel, 2000, p.46). As a result, 'the image of an effective organization became that of a university with the capacity to achieve and prove competitive powers, and to demonstrate financial and corporate viability.' (Johnson, 2000a, p. 191)

### **4.2.3 Efficiency as economy**

The 1987 White Paper also gave another extension of the definition of ‘efficiency’- efficiency as economy. It assumed that there was a link between educational, industrial and national economic success. It implied that the students’ role and interest in studying is instrumental: focused on maximizing potential career and incomes levels and that research should no longer be about exploratory work towards unpredictable discoveries but directly instrumental to economic needs. Efficiency has thus become defined as about cost reduction and competitive production within institutional units, and is defined as the extent to which higher education products match the ends of industry and commerce (Johnson, 2000a).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discusses and analyzes three important contextual factors in the rise of quality and quality audit in UK higher education: the changed relationship between universities and the Government, the expansion of the higher education system, and the development of university funding mechanisms and quality regimes, which are closely related to each other. The changed relationship and the expansion can be perceived as the key reasons for the change of UK Government policy with respect to university funding mechanisms and quality regimes through which the requirement of accountability is articulated and regulated. Meanwhile, universities are encouraged to compete for efficiency as on the basis of bureaucratic-rationality, efficiency as more for less, and efficiency as economy. Under the pressure of external quality assurance mechanisms, the universities set up their own internal mechanisms to meet the requirement of the external mechanisms, and to assure and enhance the quality of their education.

## **Chapter 3: Debates on Quality and Quality Related Terms in Higher Education**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes and analyzes the interpretations of quality and its related terms in the higher education sector in England. There is a focus on the different interpretations of quality from section one to section three. Most of these interpretations are related to the quality audit movement, rather than addressing the meaning of quality in higher education. Sections four and section five include an analysis of the understanding of various quality related terms, such as quality audit, quality assurance, and quality assessment.

### **Section one: Conceptualizing quality in the context of higher education**

Quality as a concept has migrated from the industrial and commercial settings of the 1980s into the domain of higher education (Newton, 2002). During the 1990s, quality became 'a central term in the lexicon of contemporary higher education and a major point of interest to various interest groups' in the UK (Newton, 2002, p.44). However, quality is a contested concept (Barnett, 1994). It means different things to different people in different circumstances. One explanation for these different views on quality is that we are living in a time of 'stakeholders'. According to Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003), the stakeholders refers to individuals or groups who are regarded as having a legitimate interest in the quality of higher education, such as, funding bodies, students, staff and employers of graduates. These stakeholders have an interest in the quality of higher education but not everyone has the same idea about what constitutes quality (Brennan & Shah, 2000).

Another reason why quality is a contested concept is because conceptions of quality are based on personal and social constructs (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Each

stakeholder constructs a view of quality based on selected attributes, but criteria for selection of the attributes are formed through their personal values and judgements, so these attributes vary from stakeholder to stakeholder. In this sense, quality has become a relative concept, relative to stakeholders in the higher education sector (Harvey & Green, 1993).

## **Section two: Harvey and Green's definition of quality**

The concepts of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993) have greatly influenced people's perception about the meaning of academic quality since the early 1990s. Lomas (2002) suggests that Harvey's five categories of quality - quality as exception, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformation - should be viewed as a matrix for defining quality, because they have the potential to form the basis of an analytical framework to consider quality in higher education. This echoes Watty's (2003) view that an understanding of these conceptions of quality would assist in an analysis of the priorities that various stakeholders bring to evaluating quality in higher education.

### **2.1 Quality as exception**

According to Harvey, the concept of quality as exception is related to high standards of performance or achievement. It means quality is something special. Harvey & Green (1993) identify three variations of exception: distinctive, embodied in excellence, and passing a minimum set of standards. The notion of excellence corresponds to the student's view of quality, because students want to ensure a relative advantage in career prospects (Lagrosen, et, al. 2004; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003).

The definition of quality as exception emphasizes standards. However, fulfilling

certain, minimum standard does not necessarily mean that quality is achieved, because standards can be independent of quality. Barnett (1992, p.57) gives an example in that 'we could find institutional performance of low quality against high standards, and of high quality when measured against comparatively low standards'. This suggests that passing a minimum set of standards can be regarded as one criterion to quality, but it will make quality become a relative concept.

## **2.2 Quality as perfection**

According to Harvey & Green (1993), quality as perfection means everything is correct and there is no fault. This approach is perceived as inappropriate in the higher education setting, because the institution does not intend to produce standardized graduates, free from defects. Therefore Watty (2003) suggests that quality as perfection should be removed from the quality categories. However, Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2003) hold a slightly different view. They argue that quality as perfection can be applied to academics and administrators in higher education, because perfection means they can achieve job satisfaction by meeting behavioural norms and upholding the core ethos of the organisation.

## **2.3 Fitness for purpose**

Harvey & Green (1993) regard 'fitness for purpose' as a functional definition of quality because it means that quality is judged in terms of the extent to which the product or service fits its purpose. Harvey & Green associate this definition of quality with two notions. One is to meet the needs, requirement or desire of the customers. The other is the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives, which has become the mostly often seen definition of quality in the higher education sector. For example, CHEA (2006) adopts the interpretation of quality as fitness for purpose and explains it as meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an

accrediting or quality assurance body.

However, there are different views on the interpretation of quality as fitness for purpose. Barnett (1992) sees it used by the funding council in England as a criterion of resource allocation, a means of legitimizing a differential funding base because it protects the general hierarchical ordering of higher education institutions from great threat from the state. Therefore the unequal distribution of resources that accompanies the hierarchical ordering will remain largely intact. In contrast, Lomas (2002) and Ottewill & Macfarlane (2004) argue that fitness for purpose is the basis of the QAA review methodology because the goals of the institution are articulated through the mission statement of the institution and at a precise academic level through a particular programme's aims and learning outcomes.

## **2.4 Value for money**

According to Green & Harvey (1993), the notion of value for money is a popular view of quality, because public services are expected to be accountable to the funders and to the 'customers'. This notion is first presented by the 1984 Audit Commission and implies paying less for the best product (Watty, 2003). Salter & Tapper contend that the idea of value for money is closely related to the 'economic ideology' of higher education, which means that 'education is an economic resource which should be organized in a way that maximizes its contribution to Britain's industrial development' (Salter & Tapper, 1994, p. 12). What Salter & Tapper imply is that as a paymaster, the government wants to ensure that institutions are accountable for carrying out their economic role, so it uses the funding councils to audit the performances of the institutions, in order to assure that money allocated to the universities is properly and effectively used. In this sense, 'value for money' is on behalf of the government to look for a good return on investment, and the notion of accountability is central to this definition of quality.

## **2.5 Transformation**

The concept of quality as transformation emphasizes the enhancement and empowerment of students. According to Harvey & Green (1993), this concept implies critical thinking which encourages students to challenge preconceptions of their own, their peers and their teachers. This notion also involves cognitive transcendence with the provider 'doing something to the customer rather than just doing something for the customer' (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 24). The concept of transformation is popular among many students who speak of their time as a student at university as a transformational experience both in developing as a learner and as a person (Barnett, 2007). This suggests that transformation is becoming an overriding objective of learners.

Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2003) hold that the notion of quality as transformation is potentially capable of addressing the concerns of all the stakeholders' group. Lomas's (2002) empirical research with 108 senior managers in HEIs in the UK reveals that transformation is one of the most appropriate definitions of quality, but problems of measuring quality as transformation have led to difficulties in its practical application. The difficulty could be explained as the notion of quality as transformation does not lend itself to the atomisation of clearly stated purposes (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Therefore there is an argument that the notion of quality as transformation has been singularly missing from all the approaches to quality in higher education so far (Harvey, 1998).

## **2.6 Critical analysis of Harvey's interpretations of quality**

Of the five interpretations of quality provided by Harvey, the notions of quality as

fitness for purpose and quality as value for money are utilitarian responses to economic needs. For example, value for money is a value-based definition and sees quality as providing good value for costs. Fitness for purpose measures quality from the operation of the market in higher education. In contrast, exception and transformation are an idealist view of quality and focus on learning for learning's sake. To make it specific, the notion of exception is closely related to the elitism of higher education, but the notion of transformation is mainly concerned with students' learning experience. The notions of exception and perfection suggest that quality is related to a particular standard or specification.

There is a perception among some academic researchers, such as Barnett (1992, 2003), Lomas (2004), and Ottewill & Macfarlane (2004), that the notions of 'fitness for purpose' and 'value for money' have become the most widely accepted concepts adopted by the HEFCE and the QAA, in spite of the fact that if quality is defined largely as excellence, massification might be considered as reducing quality with more meaning worse/ different (Lomas, 2004). The wide use of quality as fitness for purpose suggests that quality has become a management concept for the government, the funding councils, and an organizing concept for the institutions. (Power, 1997)

Except for the differences between different notions of quality, these various notions have the potential to overlap at the margin and are not mutually exclusive (Harvey & Green, 1993). Take the concepts of 'exception' and 'fitness for purpose' for example. One variation of 'exception' is excellence, a kind of conformance to standards. This is similar to a requirement of 'fitness for purpose' that the institution sets its goals and then meets these by conforming to the standards it has set itself. When the institution meets the standard, it will be recognised as 'excellent' by the QAA. In this sense, both perfection and fitness for purpose are judged by standards. They are actually conforming to requirements and specifications, so they are manufacturing-based definitions.



Not only the HEFCE and the QAA but some academic managers hold the view that quality can be seen as fitness for purpose and value for money. For example, Lomas's (2002) research with 108 senior managers in a wide range of higher education institutions reveals that the definition of quality as fitness for purpose is the most popular one in universities, closely followed by transformation. Excellence and value for money received far lower ratings with the latter as the least popular definition. This finding is related to the fact that the QAA uses 'fitness for purpose' to assess the quality of university performance, which might have influenced the managers' perception of quality. The prevalence of the notions of quality as fitness for purpose and quality as value for money suggests that although the most important stakeholders of higher education are academics and students, their voice has been less prominent than that of the Government. The government uses quality as an ideological symbol to legitimate its regulation of the higher education sector while proportionately reducing resources for it (see context chapter). This echoes the argument of Barnett (1994) that the debate over quality is actually 'a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in an attempt to impose their own definitions of higher education' (p.6).

### **Section three: Other interpretations to quality**

Except for Harvey & Green's (1993) interpretations of quality, there are some other ways to understand quality in the higher education sector, such as, quality as meeting the expectations of customers (DfES, 2003), quality as power (Morley, 2003), and quality as bureaucratisation, impression management, and conformity (Newton, 2002). The following sections will analyse these other interpretations of quality.

#### **3.1 Meeting expectations of customers**

As analyzed in section 2.3, quality as fitness for purpose emphasizes the importance

of customers (Harvey & Green, 1993). This notion of quality has been extended to meeting the expectations of customers in the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003). Meeting the expectation of customers means that the quality of teaching and learning in higher education is expected to meet the perceived needs of students and employers. Meeting the expectations of customers is a user-based definition because it makes quality become a means for customer satisfaction. However, this definition makes quality individual and partly subjective as the expectations of customers can vary.

### **3.2 Quality as power**

Except for the definition of quality as meeting expectations of customers, Morley (2003) uncovers some ways in which quality is experienced by academics and managers in the higher education sector. Morley argues that quality is a political technology functioning as a regime and as a relay of power. This argument is mainly based on two theories. One is that quality audit establishes relationships of power between observers and observed because audit creates and maintains certain norms. According to Shore & Wright (1999), norms can constitute an invisible web of power because the norms become internalized and more difficult to recognize and contest. The other theory Morley uses is that the insertion of quality discourse into the higher education sector is an example of the changing relations between universities and the state. The state has shifted from a promoter of intellectual activity to a controller of it (Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996). Quality audit is thus the state asserting its responsibility, as it perceives it, to monitor and control the activities of academics. Morley's reveals that academics fear quality audit as a means of controlling their activities, and that academics were concerned of the compliance culture associated with the quality audit movement. Morley's interpretation of quality helps to explain academics' perception of, and response to, audit.

### 3.3 Other interpretations of quality

Together with seeing quality as power, there is an indication that academics' definition of quality has become equated with bureaucratisation, educational orthodoxy, and conformity (Henkel, 2000). Harvey (2005) suggests that the term 'quality' is used 'as shorthand for the bureaucratic procedures than to refer to the concept of quality itself' (p. 272).

Similarly, Newton's empirical research on how academics have made sense of the quality revolution in UK higher education suggests that quality had become associated by most in the UK academic community with 'bureaucracy' and 'burden' by the mid-1990s (Newton, 2002, p.45). The followings are nine views on quality from Newton:

1. Quality as 'ritualism' and 'tokenism' (Newton, 2002, p. 46). It means academics use procedures primarily to satisfy external requirements and that quality enhancement becomes a residual feature of quality systems.
2. Quality as 'impression management' (Newton, 2002, p. 46), because preparations for external assessment are carefully scripted and stage-managed.
3. Quality as a 'burden' and part of an inspectorial compliance culture. (Newton, 2002, p. 46)
4. Quality as 'failure to close the loop' (Newton, 2002, p. 46), in the sense that key service areas are usually excluded from the formal system for managing academic quality.
5. Quality as 'suspicion of management motives' (Newton, 2002, p. 46). In other words, academics view quality monitoring, externally or internally driven, as an essentially managerial tool that threatens academic or professional autonomy.
6. Quality as 'discipline' and 'technology' (Newton, 2002, p. 46). He suggests that quality audit emphasizes 'better systems' or 'improvements in quality assurance', but academics perceive that these are distinct from improvements in quality.
7. Quality as 'front-line staff resistance' (Newton, 2002, p. 46). It means that

academics respond to quality audit in different ways with varying degrees of enthusiasm and support because audit implementation lacks academic ownership.

8. Quality as 'lack of mutual trust' (Newton, 2002, p. 46). The requirement of accountability is perceived as distrust of front-line academics.

9. Quality as a culture of 'getting by' (Newton, 2002, p. 46): academics feel constrained by lack of time and associate the shift from 'resource-led' to 'improvement-led' with confusing demands.

When compared with Harvey & Green's (1993) interpretations of quality, Newton's findings construct an alternative understanding of quality. It provides valuable insights into how academics cope with quality and think of quality. However, both Newton's and Harvey & Green's interpretations of quality have stakeholder-specific meaning. Their views are value related and judgemental. Harvey & Green's interpretations look at the perspectives of various stakeholder groups, whilst Newton's focuses on one stakeholder, the academic who is responsible for the performance of the university (Watty, 2003).

Later in his writing, Newton summarizes the ten themes into two: quality as 'intrusion, inspection and bureaucracy'; and quality as 'conformist behaviour' (Newton, 2002, p.56). These two themes suggest that academics as one stakeholder even hold different views of quality in higher education. These views suggest that academics use quality as a pejorative term, which can be perceived as academics' protest against audit, instead of really explaining what quality is in the higher education sector.

However, the above interpretation of quality can be useful in the following ways. First, it suggests that many academics have grown increasingly sceptical of and resistant to quality audit. This might be due to worsening working conditions for academics as a result of the expansion of UK higher education (See Chapter 2). Second, academics' pejorative use of the term quality reveals that it is important for

academics to have their own shared definition of quality in higher education, or to reach a consensus between other stakeholder groups with regard to what is meant by 'quality' in higher education, instead of simply protesting against the notion of quality imposed from outside the sector. If 'academics do not agree that quality assurance systems currently measure what they regard as 'quality in higher education', then there is a need to first recognise that differences exist and then identify these differences in conceptions', in order to establish a quality model which would be accepted widely within their community (Watty, 2003, p. 213).

In summary, the literature reveals that the government, the funding bodies and academics have different understanding of quality in higher education. This suggests that quality is an elusive concept. However, quality as intrusion, inspection and bureaucracy, and as conformist behaviour is a negative conception and does not indicate more positively what are the key components of quality in higher education, so it is better to regard these concepts as the academics' perception of and responses to the quality audit movement in England. As for the notions of quality as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as meeting expectations of customers, comparatively speaking, the notion of quality as exception corresponds with the traditional view of elite education, but these standards of excellence must be defined by the academics and their institution. Moreover, this concept does not fit easily within the context of the massification of higher education.

From my perspective, quality as transformation is the most appropriate definition, because it emphasizes the development of student, and because it empowers students by letting them develop to their full potential, which is the ultimate goal of higher education according to Barnett (1990). Empowering students does not contradict but helps the development of subjects and disciplines where the academics' authority rests in. However, there is currently less attention paid to the notion of quality as transformation in the higher education sector in England, partly because the sector is undergoing a transition period due to massification and quality audit which diverts

academics' attention from quality as transformation, and because of the difficulty in applying or being able to audit quality as transformation. Therefore it might be a long time before the higher education sector has quality as transformation as its model.

#### **Section four: Quality audit**

Together with quality, another world-wide phenomenon, quality audit in higher education began in the 1980s. According to Power (1994, 1997), audit has become central to ways of talking about administrative control in the UK since the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, audit has been used as a main way to ensure that institutions are providing higher education awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and that institutions are exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner (QAA, 2006). From the social science researchers' perspective, for example, Shore & Wright (2000), audit refers to not only a specific inspection regime but also a culture and a concept which is developed in the process of evaluating the public sector. Therefore there are different interpretations to audit. The sections below analyze audit first from the social science perspective, then as an inspection regime for quality assurance.

##### **4.1 Audit as a culture**

Both Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) analyze audit from the social science perspective, but they analyze audit in a slightly different way. According to Power (1994, 1997), audit is a concept and can be perceived as an idea, control of control, and a form of impression management. Audit is an idea because it is based on the assumption that when the economic resources of one party are entrusted to another, human nature is weak, untrustworthy, so there is a need for some kind of check. The reason for the use of audit is because 'quality *must* be made measurable'

to a wider audience, whether this is the customer, the regulator, or even the customer as a regulator (Power, 1997, p. 60). Audit thus functions as a vehicle for change in the name of ideals such as 'cost effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'quality' and so on (Power, 1997, p. 60).

Power (1997) reveals that the technical practices of audit shift from 'checking the arithmetical accuracy of every transaction, document or entry, to evaluating 'the strength of internal control'(p.20), because of the belief that effective regulation is possible and capable of 'reaching into the inner motives of target organizations' (p. 54). Organizations subject to audit develop their own internal system of control. The external audit process concentrates on these controls in the organization under scrutiny, so audit becomes 'control of control' (ibid).

The control aspect of audit raised by Power is shared by Shore & Wright (2000). However, instead of seeing audit simply as an innocuously neutral, legal-rational practice, Shore & Wright regard audit as a culture and argue that this culture is an instrument for new forms of governance and power, embodying a new rationality and morality, and designed to engender new norms of conduct and professional behaviour among academic staff.

It is obvious that both Power and Shore & Wright perceive audit as a kind of control. The control view of audit helps explain academics' resistance, but Power and Shore & Wright give little consideration to how quality audit operates in practice and what its intended purposes are, which are concerned with the methods of the audit inspection. The definition of quality audit by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) which is a national agency in the USA can help to provide an explanation.

## 4.2 Quality audit as an inspection system

According to CHEA (2006), quality audit is a test of an institution's quality assurance and control system through a self-evaluation and external review of its programs, staff, and infrastructure. It is designed to provide an assessment of an institution's system of accountability, internal review mechanisms, and effectiveness with an external body confirming that the institution's quality assurance process complies with accepted standards.

CHEA explains the function of audit and how audit assessment processes work. Similarly, Pearce (1995) regards quality audit as a means of checking relevant systems and structures within an institution to support its key teaching mission, and to ensure that provision is at or beyond a satisfactory level of quality. A quality audit can be conducted either internally or externally. Audit checks that the university system does what it says it is going to do, and has written documented evidence to prove it.

Both CHEA and Pearce conceive quality audit as a test of whether an institution's quality assurance process complies with the external review requirement or not. However, Pearce divides quality audit into two levels: internal and external. The internal refers to the quality process within the institution. The external is the quality review imposed upon the institution. This is identical to Power's (1994, 1997) argument that audit is control of control, because the quality assurance mechanisms imposed upon the institution, such as external examining and Institutional Audit would control and check the performance of the quality assurance mechanisms inside the institution.

The above interpretations of quality audit and the characteristics of Institutional Audit enacted by the QAA (see context chapter) reveal that quality audit in England



has the following four characteristics: external assurance, easy access information, a finance system connecting with quality, and academic standard based audit. The external assurance can be understood as Institutional Audit, external examining, the review of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and the National Student Survey required at the national level and imposed upon the institution to examine the institution's internal quality management process. The opening up of information systems means that the information relating to quality and standards is now available to the public. The finance system connects with the way that HEFCE uses funding to regulate the activities of higher education institutions. The QAA also references academic quality and standards in higher education in its code of practice.

### **Section five: Other terms related to quality**

The literature reveals there are some other terms related to quality, such as quality control, quality assessment, quality assurance, and quality enhancement. Like quality audit, these terms are concerned with maintaining and improving the quality of higher education, but involve different management processes. This section is going to discuss and analyse these terms, reveal their differences and similarities, and explore the characteristics of management issues associated with these terms. Most interpretations of these terms are quoted from CHEA and QAA which are national agencies for quality assurance.

#### **5.1 Quality control**

CHEA (2006) explains quality control as mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision. Frazer (1992) defines quality control as a system to check whether the products produced or services provided have reached pre-defined standards. In the quality control process, quality is usually inspected at the end of the production process and is undertaken by

someone external to the workforce. Compared with Frazer's interpretation which is adopted from and applies to industry production, the definition of CHEA is higher education focused. It suggests that quality control is a quality mechanism within the institution, with the aim of assuring and enhancing quality. This reveals that quality control is a general format of management, including both quality assurance and quality enhancement.

## **5.2 Quality assessment**

Because my research only concerns teaching quality, not research quality, so the first stage in the introduction of quality assessment by the UK Government can be seen from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which required the funding councils to establish a Quality Assessment Committee, with the function of assessing the quality of education provided in institutions.

According to the DES (1991:13 and 24), quality assessment is 'external review of', and 'judgements about', the quality of teaching and learning in institutions. The DES implies that the assessment is from outside the higher education institutions. In contrast, the CHEA (2006) puts less emphasis on regarding quality assessment as external, but defines quality assessment as a diagnostic review and evaluation of teaching, learning, and outcomes based assessment through a detailed examination of curricula, structure, and effectiveness of the institution or program. It is designed to determine if the institution or program meets generally accepted standards of excellence.

Both DES and CHEA suggest that quality assessment is a means of assessing the quality of what is actually provided by institutions, but DES puts emphasis on teaching and learning without mentioning the criterion or standard of the external review. In contrast, the CHEA considers not only teaching and learning but the

outcome. However, Pearce (1995) shows his concern that when quality assessment intends to be mission sensitive and examines the quality of education provision against the expressed aspirations of the individual institutions, there are some potential problems with quality assessment, because these aspirations could be either high or low. For example, if a university has high aspirations, quality is to be measured against this high yardstick. This would make it more difficult for the university to succeed than another university which sets lower aspirations.

### **5.3 Quality assurance**

Quality assurance is another important concept in the quality debate. The QAA and the CHEA interpret quality assurance in a slightly different way. In the opinion of the QAA (2003), quality assurance is a way of describing all the systems, resources and information that universities and higher education colleges use to maintain and improve standards and quality, which includes teaching and student learning, scholarship and research, but my research is only concerned with the teaching aspect.

In contrast, the CHEA (2006) glossary suggests that quality assurance is a planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced. Usually this includes expectations that mechanisms of quality control are in place and effective. Also, in the U.K., institutions must confirm that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by the institution or other awarding body.

There are overlaps and differences between these two definitions. Both emphasize that standard needs ought to be maintained and enhanced or improved, and both suggest that quality assurance is invisible, but you can assess it, because it is a process open to evaluation. However, there are some differences between these

definitions. On the one hand, CHEA holds that quality assurance is a review process, while QAA regards it as a way to describe the processes of quality maintenance and improvement. On the other hand, CHEA suggests that quality assurance expects that mechanisms of quality control are in place and effective. This reveals that quality assurance is a form of compulsory control. In contrast, the QAA describes quality assurance as a system, resource and source of information used to maintain and improve quality in the higher education institutions. The definition of the QAA does not mention the control nature of quality assurance and nor does it make clear whether the system the universities use is compulsory or voluntary. The QAA might have assumed that quality assurance is a system based on the premise that everyone in the university has a responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of higher education. The QAA definition suggests that quality assurance in the UK is a light touch regime (Harvey, 2005). One reason might be that this definition was dated from 2003, a time shortly after the QAA had completed a full cycle of departmental inspections in 2002, and then it moved towards Institutional Audit dropping subject based inspections. This has become known as a light touch approach which means the institution is responsible for its own quality standards, and that the Institutional Audit makes sure that the institution has the appropriate procedures to achieve this.

Whatever the differences lying in behind these interpretations, it is noticeable that quality assurance is linked to three main underlying rationales: accountability, compliance and improvement (Harvey, 1999). Compared with quality control and quality assessment, quality assurance is the most comprehensive approach to assess and to monitor quality in higher education. Its main purpose is to make judgements against defined criteria, require not just the detection of defects as in quality control but also the prevention of defects. People in the institution are expected to be committed to an organizational culture that prizes quality, relentlessly improving in search of perfection. However, these aims and purposes are very difficult to achieve. It might often remain as a goal or philosophy that universities aspire to achieve or get closer to rather than a reality (Tam, 2001).

#### 5.4 Quality enhancement

With the implementation of Institutional Audit enacted by the QAA, the quality agenda in UK higher education has shifted from quality assurance to quality enhancement. The quality enhancement strategy was first adopted by the HEQC, and then rediscovered by the HEFCE (Harvey, 2005). The QAA is supplementing existing quality assurance frameworks through a more active strategy for quality enhancement (ibid). Meanwhile a new national body, the Higher Education Academy, was established in 2004 from an amalgamation of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in higher education and other related bodies. Its primary purpose is to improve the student experience, by addressing it as quality enhancement. As a result, quality enhancement is becoming a widely used term and a contemporary concern in the quality management in UK higher education. This term also appears in the case study university.

According to CHEA (2006), quality enhancement is a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement. It is an inclusive concept and a collective enterprise. It involves everyone who teaches, supports and guides students and the managers and administrators of HE institutions. It includes significant strategic initiatives and the many small things that people do to try to make things better.

The definition of CHEA emphasizes improvement, and things contributing to improvement, such as strategy, academics and other professional support staff within the HEIs. In the view of QAA (2003), continuous improvement should be the ongoing concern of any enhancement strategy. It means that no matter where one is starting from, it is always possible to seek improvement. In operational terms, the process cannot literally be continuous, but will involve a cycle of planned phases

including reflection, planning, implementation and evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented different interpretations of quality and quality related terms in the higher education sector, and analyzed the differences and similarities among interpretations of these terms. The concept of quality as: exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation, identified by Harvey and Green (1993), have greatly influenced people's perception about the meaning of academic quality since the early 1990s. However, nowadays there are some other ways to understand quality, such as, quality as meeting the expectations of customers (DfES, 2003), quality as power (Morley, 2003), and quality as bureaucratisation, impression management, and conformity (Newton, 2002). These interpretations suggest that academics associated quality with 'bureaucracy' and 'burden', and perceived quality as power control over their work.

The elusive concept of quality suggests that academics, the UK government and different stakeholders of higher education have different views of quality. Therefore it is time for different stakeholders to reach a widely accepted understanding of quality in the higher education sector in order to improve quality as intended. Because my research is concerned with teaching quality only, it focuses on the teaching assessment, especially on quality assurance and quality enhancement. The interpretations and the comparison of these terms related with quality help to understand the quality management process of teaching in the higher education sector in England.

## **Chapter 4: The Changing Academic Profession in England**

### **Introduction**

The British higher education sector has been undergoing a process of rapid change since World War II. Key elements to this change are:

- Reforms of the higher education sector during Thatcherism;
- Structural systematic change of the polytechnics into the university;
- Changes in resource allocation to universities, especially the transformation of the funding regime;
- Evaluation of teaching by quality audit; and
- Substantial and rapid growth in student numbers together with a substantial decline in per capita student funding.

As a result, the British higher education system has transformed from an elite to a mass system, with the management of the institutions moving from a collegial towards a more managerial model. The ways that this move has influenced the work of academics is discussed in this chapter. Section one presents the debate on whether academic work is a profession or not. Section two describes the shift from collegiality to managerialism, revealing that quality audit is closely related with the development of 'new' managerialism. Section three highlights the value tensions academics face in the process of quality audit.

### **Section one: Academic work, a profession?**

There are different views on the nature of academic work. One view is that academic work is a profession (Halsey, 1992; Henkel, 2000; Millet, 1967; Wilson, 1979).

Another view is that academic work is a vocation (Weber, 1918). There is also an intermediate view from Hogan (2003) that academic work is halfway between a job and a vocation. Hogan describes teaching as a way of life. These different views on academic work spread over different time spans, so an understanding of their specific historical context needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis. Before discussing these views, the distinction between a profession and an occupation will be introduced below.

### **1.1 Distinguishing a profession from an occupation**

According to Kultgen (1988), the word 'profession' is derived from "profiteri", which comes from 'pro' plus 'fassfateri', to confess, and to own. In English, 'to confess' is first to take the vows of a religious order, to declare them openly, to lay claim to some quality or feeling and finally to declare oneself proficient or expert (Kultgen, 1988). A profession is normally conceived of as a particular occupation, with features of a monopoly, with control over who practices, moral integrity, adherence to code of practice, special expertise, and expert service (Freidson, 2001; Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977).

Johnson (1972) regards a profession as a kind of occupation, and defines it as a method of controlling work - one in which an occupation exercises control over its work. This suggests that a profession is special in its power in establishing and maintaining its control over work. Johnson interprets professionalism as 'a successful ideology that has entered the political vocabulary of a wide range of occupational groups in their claims and competition for status and income' (p, 32). This interpretation reveals that professionalisation is about market closure and control, and that due to this market closure, professionals have gained a monopoly to promote their own occupational self interests in terms of salary, power and status returns.



Similarly, Larson (1977) perceives a profession as a particular occupation, and terms the process in which occupations seek to improve their economic position and their social prestige as professionalisation. However, Larson differs from Johnson in perceiving a profession as part of an official occupational classification scheme in England. Larson argues that gaining recognition as a profession is important to occupations because the special expertise and moral probity emphasized by the traditional concept of the profession have provided a basis for legitimating protection for the profession from the forces of occupational competition. Using an historical analysis of the development of the medical profession, Larson points out that the development of the profession is a collective mobility project which has control over who practices. The aim of the project is individualistic, although the project and its means are collective: it is through the upgrading of an occupation – with the attempt to control the individual members which this involves – that prestige is attached to the professional roles, and by extension, to their occupants.

Unlike Johnson who does not treat trust as an essential aspect of professionalism, Larson argues that trust has become an ideological control mechanism of the powerful occupational groups. However, Freidson (2001) holds a different view that there is a link between the notion of trust and the notion of professionalism, and that trust is one value of professionalism. Freidson perceives a profession as generically an occupation, with specialized knowledge and skills required to perform different tasks in a division of labour. He regards professionalism as the ideology of expertise and service and as a special set of institutions which serves not only as a unique form of occupational control of work but as a discourse to promote and to facilitate occupational change.

Both Larson and Freidson regard a profession as an occupation, but Freidson differs from Larson in considering the logics of three different ways of organizing work and workers in contemporary societies: the market, organization and profession. This provides a holistic picture of how the profession relates with society, and reveals that it is specialized knowledge and skill that make the profession differ from the occupation. Comparatively speaking, Larson provides a more convincing argument that the specialized forms of knowledge and skills enable the profession to gain economic position and social prestige which in turn, gain control over who practices. As a result, this would benefit development and upgrading of the profession. Larson's view helps to explain the role of control in the nature of a profession, and the social and economic factors related to it. While it is obvious that Larson and Freidson have different focuses in their argument, and because both interpretations are essential dimensions of the profession, it is better to combine the views of Larson and Freidson in order to better understand what a profession is.

## **1.2 Academic work as a profession**

It is noticeable that Freidson (2001), Johnson (1972), and Larson (1977) are all mainly concerned with law and medicine as professions. Far less attention has been paid to academic work. Can academic work be regarded as a profession? According to Wilson (1979), academic work is a profession. Wilson based his argument on the following three main reasons: universities are the seedbed of the traditional professions; the professional ethos for academics has deep roots; academic work has the attributes of a profession, such as special expertise, moral integrity, and control over who practices. These attributes have been raised and discussed by Freidson (2001), Johnson (1972), and Larson (1977).

What Wilson (1979) implies is that academic work possesses some attributes of the

profession. One example Wilson gave is that academic work has a knowledge base that requires a lengthy period of education and which is central to academic practice. The other example is that academic work has a kind of authority within organizations, not only in that academics manage their own teaching and research and manager-academics deal with academic work, but also with recognition of a standard of conduct to govern the exercise of this knowledge and skill.

However, when compared with the features of a traditional profession, academic work is different from the traditional professions in three ways. One difference is that there is no absolute requirement of specific prior qualifications for entry to the academic profession in the UK (Fulton & Holland, 2001). Although there is control over who practices as an academic, in the sense that doctorates particularly control access to research (Fulton & Holland, 2001), academic teaching is not recognized for general certification, whilst the traditional professions normally do - for example medicine and law. Moreover, the 1997 Dearing Report recommended that all academic staff should demonstrate that they were fully trained and qualified to teach. Subsequently, the CVCP set up the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) in Higher Education to manage the national framework for training and certification. Although the ILT was university owned and controlled, it was perceived as a kind of government intervention (Fulton & Holland, 2001). However, the national training for all academic teaching in university has not become compulsory, because the qualification of the academics is independent on the institutions' rules and regulations, in spite of the fact that many UK universities now require that academics with less than 3 years experience take a postgraduate certificate course in learning and teaching (HEA, 2008).

The second difference between academic work and the traditional profession is that academics are loyal to their subjects/disciplines (Becher & Trowler, 2001). However,

these different subjects/disciplines, such as law, medicine, and architecture, have formed the traditional professions, so in this sense, it is hard to perceive academic work as a single profession. Academics are often drawn from a multitude of other professions such as law, nursing and medicine. They are both an academic and a continuing member of this other profession.

The third difference between academic work and the traditional profession can be seen by the consideration of 'expert service' (Freidson, 2001; Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977). While professional work always involves 'expert service', meaning applying complex, theoretical and specialized knowledge to the problems of clients, employers, or customers, it is hard to consider the work of academics as the application of 'expert service'. One reason is because of the difficulty in defining academics' students as clients and customers. Another reason is that the term 'profession' is usually related to the traditional professions, such as, law and medicine, so it only connotes the prominent features of these traditional professions, such as, involving an intimate relationship with individual clients, and providing services/consultancy to the clients. These features do not happen in the process of academics teaching to students.

However, considering that academic work has some characteristics of the traditional profession, can we extend the term profession to academic work? According to Kultgen (1988, p.5), the answer to this question is yes as professions can be 'taken broadly to embrace the literally hundreds of occupations that so label themselves and fret over their professionalism'. Based on the analysis of the effect of professionalism on the moral life of society, Kultgen argues that the term profession includes not only members of the learned professions, but teachers. Similarly, Freidson (2001) relates the term profession to the higher education sector, and argues that the professional ideology of service goes beyond serving others' choices. Rather,

*it claims devotion to a transcendent value which infuses its specialization with a larger and putatively higher goal which may reach beyond that of those they are supposed to serve. Each body of professional knowledge and skill is attached to such a value'. (Freidson, 2001, p. 122)*

What Freidson suggests is that because academic work has its specialization, it can be perceived as a profession. There are some other academic researchers who regard academic work as a profession. For example, based on both policy analysis and interviews in eleven UK universities, Henkel (2000) argues that British academics are engaged in reprofessionalization in spite of their changing environment, and that big changes are taking place in the areas of academic disciplinary practice. For example, academics felt their autonomy was being reduced and some areas of their work were under scrutiny and subjected to intervention not only by academic management but by audit. However, the traditional academic values like the balance of teaching and research and views about institutional management, whilst differentiated by disciplines and departmental loyalties, appear constant across disciplines – leading. What Henkel implies is that as long as academics can balance their teaching and research effectively, they are professionals.

In contrast, in the view of Halsey (1992), academics are deprofessionalised as proletarianization in the UK has occurred. The proletarianization takes the form of a

*'threefold reduction of power and advantage in the work and market position of a class or occupational group: in autonomy of working activity, security of employment, and chance of promotion' (Halsey, 1992, p. 125).*

Halsey's argument relies on three surveys of British academic staff conducted in 1964/5, 1967, and 1989, in order to revisit the British academic profession and to analyze its changing structures and functions since the 1960s. One example Halsey uses to argue against the proletarianization of academic work is that the prestige,

salaries, autonomy and resources of academics have been much reduced compared with the period before the 1960s. This is due to the expansion of the higher education sector, lack of resources, and external control over the institutions. Halsey shows his concern that these changes led to not only discontent within the profession but also lowered attributions of prestige both by the public and by the British political elite.

However, Trowler (1998) argues that Halsey's analysis overstates both the nature of changes in academics' working conditions and the sense of loss of prestige that these changes have created. Similarly, Fulton & Holland (2001) point out that there is no reliable data other than salary information that would enable people to judge the validity of Halsey's observation. Except for the above disagreement with Halsey (1992), there is an indication that Halsey (1992) put too much emphasis in regarding professionalisation as a process in which the occupation seeks to improve both their economic position and their social prestige. One example he uses is that university teachers used to have comparatively better incomes and enjoyed greater autonomy and higher social respect under the patronage of government in the immediate post-war period. However, since the 1970s, the academic's working conditions have declined, especially in that their incomes have not kept pace when compared with other relevant occupations. One reason is because the government pressed universities to weaken the strength of tenure for those appointed after 1988. Academics' promotion opportunities also deteriorated. According to Halsey (1992), 'the proportion who held professorial rank fell from 12 per cent in 1964 through 10 per cent in 1976 to 9 per cent in 1989' (pp. 135). These examples suggest that Halsey links the deprofessionalisation mainly with loss of status and the deterioration of academics' working conditions, but he does not discuss other characteristics of the academic profession such as their expert knowledge and their control over their subject knowledge. However, expert knowledge and control over the subjects is one sign of academics' professionalism (Henkel, 2000), because the knowledge and skills of the subjects would enable academics to claim social recognition and economic

rewards (Larson, 1977). In other words, professionalisation is an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources into another (Larson, 1977), so academics' possession of scarce knowledge and skill is the principal basis on which they claim social recognition and economic rewards.

If academic work is a profession, its professionalization would involve market closure and control, expert knowledge, and expert service, like the traditional profession experiences. Therefore, the structure of the academic professional market would thus be

*'determined by the larger social structure within which it is situated. The stage of economic development, the volume and distribution of national income, the class structure and ethnic composition, the average standard of living, the nature of the state and its policies, and ideology – including a variety of cultural traditions – define the potential, the characteristics, and the dynamics of a profession's market.'*  
(Larson, 1977, pp.50)

It happens in history that although the traditional professions can sometimes initiate projects and influence governments, professions often have to respond to external demands for change, which may be political, economic, cultural and social (Evetts, 2006). Assuming academic work is a profession, a similar trend appears to have occurred in the higher education sector in England, particularly as the government has become its main funder. It is hard for the higher education institutions to survive and to develop without the resource and support from society and the government. Therefore, it is inevitable that the government has tended to challenge the higher education institutions to make them meet its designated needs in the audit context. In this sense, Halsey's arguments that the loss of academic status and the deterioration of academics' working conditions are a bit weak in proving that the academic profession is deprofessionalized.

Except for the perceived decline in working conditions, massification was regarded by Halsey (1992) as another cause of academic deprofessionalization. According to him, this massification helps to break the market closure which enables academics to achieve a monopoly of control to promote and to further their own occupational self interests in terms of salary, power and status returns, so in the long run, the attractiveness and the general social prestige of being an academic would be adversely affected. It is obvious that Halsey's argument of massification is again connected to the ability of academics to gain economic benefits and social status, which it has been argued is weak evidence in proving that the academic profession is deprofessionalized when compared with other traditional professions.

Another flaw in Halsey's argument is that his critique calls people back to a previous age of the elite university rather than facing and addressing the problems of contemporary mass higher education in England. This corresponds with Scott's (1995) worry that in the British case, it is possible to create a mass system while retaining an elitist mentality in thinking about it. Therefore, I prefer Henkel's (2000) analysis to Halsey (1992), because Henkel analyzes professionalism not only as an ideology of expertise and service, a unique form of occupational control of work, but also as a discourse to promote and facilitate occupational change (Freidson, 2001). Henkel not only presents the negative impacts of quality audit on the work of academics but also points out that academics have adapted to these changes and become reprofessionalized through the audit process. The perceived reprofessionalisation suggests that academics as 'professional workers are accepting, incorporating and accommodating to the concepts of 'profession' and particularly 'professionalism' in their work' (Evetts, 2006, p. 523).



### **1.3 Academic work as a vocation**

Except for the view that academic work is a profession, Weber in his classic lecture 'Science as a Vocation' points out that science is a vocation organized into special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and knowledge of interrelated facts. The science Weber refers to includes both natural science and historical science taught by teachers in the university. There are two main reasons for Weber treating academic science as a vocation. One is its specialization. The other is its presupposition. According to Weber, science has entered a phase of specialization and will forever remain the case. Weber also argues that science is not free from presuppositions, because scientific work presupposes that their rules of logic and method are valid, and that what is yielded by scientific work is important and worth knowing. These presuppositions are perceived by Weber as problematic, because they cannot be proved by scientific means, but only be interpreted by reference to its ultimate meaning, which people reject or accept according to their understanding of life. Considering the free of presumption nature of science, Weber argues that the primary task of the teacher is to serve the students with his knowledge and scientific experience instead of imprinting upon them his personal value judgements in order to enable students to have a fuller and more independent understanding of the facts.

It is obvious that Weber's view has been influenced by his emphasis on the spiritual factors with regards to knowing the world. This can be detected from his use of the term 'vocation', because vocation originally means 'first a call or summons to the religious life; then the work to which one is called; finally, regular employment' (Kultgen, 1988, p. 82). It means that when making demands upon a person, a profession is a vocation, a calling by God or by nature as voiced in the native endowments that equip one to serve others (Kultgen, 1988).

Moreover, Weber's argument on vocation is mainly based in the background of an elite education in Germany. The science Weber conceives of is quite different from the academic work nowadays. Although there is a sense of rationality in Weber's work, in that he does not deny the usage and the importance of science, Weber's view is confined by the German social context in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time there was specialization of science in universities, which were very research oriented and where science might have been taught by academics only. This context might have enabled a larger degree of freedom for academics in their work.

However, in the current social context, there is a change to the generalization of science. This change has been raised and explained by Hackett (1990) who theoretically and empirically examines the changes in the structure and values of science subjects in universities in the 1990s in the USA. He argues against treating science and the academy as equivalent. Hackett (1990) points out that although there is a high degree of interdependence and interpenetration between science and the academy, their goals, values, and norms are not equivalent. The marriage of research and teaching within the university has limited and compromised the purposes of both endeavors. Considering the characteristics of academic science, Hackett holds that it is not operating independently of society as Weber suggests. Instead, it is undertaken within organizations which have their unique properties, dynamics, and goals which endure across sectors, communities, cultures, and societies. The academic science is thus shaped by general organizational forces, particularly the quest for resources and legitimacy. Hackett's finding suggests that science and academe are different, so Weber's view on academic science as a vocation needs to be reconsidered.

#### **1.4 Teaching as a way of life**

Except for Hackett who disagreed with academic work as a profession, Hogan (2003)

also argues against regarding academic work as a vocation, because the 'vocation' concept is associated with the prominence of church influence in the history of Western education. The vocation concept 'carries strong connotations of service given for a loftier purpose than monetary reward and it is also linked with ecclesiastical requirements of obedience to higher authority' (Hogan, 2003, p. 208). Hogan holds that academic work is halfway between a profession and a vocation and that teaching is a specific way of life with its own integrity because teaching makes 'an occupational commitment to a form of action that has an authority of its own and responsibilities of its own' (Hogan, 2003, p. 209).

In general Hogan perceives teaching and learning as involving not only a repertoire of competencies to be mastered and shared, but as something qualitatively different, because everyone has different lifestyles, value orientations and careers. This suggests that Hogan regards education as a human practice, a form of purposeful action with goods and virtues internal to itself that it seeks to sustain and develop. The best example of teaching, according to Hogan, is Socrates of Athens who treated teaching as inspiration. When Socrates raised a question, he did not give out answers, but was keen to venture afresh with others, in order to get some new insights (Hogan, 2003). It is evident that Socrates' model of teaching has the characteristics of being reflective and showing respect for learners. These characteristics of teaching have been passed on, but are developed with more emphasis on the students and have been addressed with different terms in higher education sector nowadays. One example is in the ambition to help students become independent and critical learners both in regards to their own discipline and the world around them (Barnett, 1990). The other example is protecting student academic freedom as one of the professional values to be possessed by teachers, which means allowing the students to freely pursue learning, so the students can become critical about knowledge claims (Macfarlane, 2004b). However, Macfarlane suggests that it would be inappropriate for teachers to hide their convictions from their students because of teachers' intellectual honesty

and emotional leakage, and that the teacher should strike a balance in protecting students' voice and in identifying their own perspectives on the issues under discussion.

However, expansion of higher education in the UK has made teaching become a transmission of knowledge and skills, instead of making it an inspiration and a one-to-one activity between a student and a teacher, so it is hard to adopt the Socratic teaching model in this situation. The argument of Hogan, that teaching is a way life, is mainly based on the historical time when academics lived in their Oxbridge colleges imbued with a collegiate culture, but nowadays, there is a trend away from collegiality toward managerialism in the UK higher education sector, of which quality audit has made academics perceive their teaching as being under scrutiny and as a compliance activity (see chapter 5). Moreover, different institutional missions, either research focused or teaching focused, could have influenced the position of teaching in the institution, which correspondingly could affect the academics' attitude to teaching. In light of this, whether the view 'teaching as a way of life' could be applied to a non Oxbridge university, especially in the context of massification and quality audit, is to be questioned.

In summary, this section discusses and analyzes three different views on the nature of academic work. These views cover different time spans. Of these views, academic work as a profession is commonly accepted. However, there is a shift from collegiality to managerialism which is perceived to be eating into academics' professionalism and into the rights of academics to manage themselves in the UK higher education sector (Halsey, 1992). The section below thus explores the ideas of collegiality and managerialism and analyses the shift from collegiality to managerialism in higher education institutions in England.

## **Section two: Shift from collegiality to managerialism**

Collegiality has its origins in the organisation of Oxbridge colleges, but over time, this collegiate tradition has seeped out of Oxbridge to influence other universities. According to Tapper, the idea of collegiality has expressed itself in three institutional arenas (Tapper, 1998; Tapper & Palfreyman, 2002): the college itself, for example, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (or 'Oxbridge'); the collegiate university, for example, the ancient collegiate universities of Oxford and Cambridge; and all the higher education institutions that have incorporated aspects of the collegiate tradition as identified within the colleges and the collegiate universities. Therefore, collegiality is interpreted differently according to the institutional context within which it is located. Its manifestation is confined to a small number of universities and continues to exist only at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Tapper, 1998). According to Tapper (1998), the model of collegiality has both physical and functional dimensions. The physical dimension refers to the colleges where the university performs its duties. The functional dimension of collegiality embodies university governance and the relationship between academic colleagues of which collegiality is treated as an idea and the values it relates are the focus of this section.

Collegiality is associated with significant academic autonomy and freedom, and defines the university as a self-governing community of scholars. Collegiality enables academics to hold an authority relating to their professional status, training and experience, and to have a right to be involved in the decision-making process of the institution in which they work (Brundrett, 1998; Dearlove, 1995, 1997). According to Bush (1995), collegiality assumes that

*'organizations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus. Power is shared among some or all members of the organization who are thought to have a mutual understanding about the*

*objectives of the institution. ' (Bush, 1995, p.52)*

Similarly, in the view of Dearlove (1995, 1997), collegiality embraces a number of concepts, such as that universities should be autonomous institutions with sufficient free funds to enjoy independence from financial pressures; participatory democracy, not representative government; consensus emerging from debate; the equal worth of all academics, with no room for hierarchy and managers; that students, support staff, administrators, lay persons, and the other non-academic staff should be excluded from university governance. However, Dearlove is also aware that these notions are so ideal that they differ from organisational reality. Firstly, in mass higher education, universities are no longer as well resourced as before. Secondly, outside of Oxbridge, lay persons have long been involved in university governance. Thirdly, the presumption of shared values does not entertain the possibility of unresolved conflicts when there are hard choices to be made. This means there is a need for some form of organizational leadership (Dearlove, 1997). These points suggest that collegial management is an ideal and that some of the benefits it offers are difficult to attain (Brundrett, 1998).

There are other critiques of the collegial models in higher education. One is that collegial governance is slow and conservative, so it will inevitably elongate the decision making process (Bush, 1995; Dearlove, 1995, 1997). Another critique is that collegiality is indifferent to institution-wide concerns, so it can easily degenerate into the single-minded and selfish pursuit of individual and departmental interests (Dearlove, 1995, 1997). These critiques suggest that collegiality has become a problematic mode of governance for delivering change in mass higher education.

Dearlove (1997) shows a concern that due to this collegiate culture, academics

believe that they should be free to manage themselves as self-employed, and that they still regard their teaching and research as craft work which establishes their work as a professional in the mass higher education. Craft work means practical skillful work 'by an individual or a small team, where constant corrections are made on the basis of the exercise of judgements that derive from experience learned on the job through apprenticeships.' (Dearlove, 1997, p. 57) As a result, academics tend to defy external control and become hostile to it. (Dearlove, 1995)

However, the university has been undergoing a series of changes: a shift from elite to a mass higher education, the greater size and complexity of universities, a move of the university towards an economic ideology, acute funding pressures, the strategies of the 1979 Thatcher government towards university marketisation, the growth of an audit culture for teaching and research, and increased accountability for the university (See context chapter). These changes have brought about a shift from collegiality to managerialism.

What is managerialism? Generally speaking, managerialism is a new mode of governance, not a term confined to higher education. According to Pollitt (1993), managerialism is a set of beliefs and practices, at the core of which there is assumption that 'better management will prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills' (p.1). On examining how the British and the Americans run their public services including education by managerialism, Pollitt argues that managerialism suggests a belief that the application of private sector management would improve the public and nonprofit sector and reduce the burden of public expenditure.

In the higher education sector, managerialism is perceived as not just a concern for,

but a belief in, the effective management of specific institutions in specific situations, because 'the 'ism' points to an ideology, to a faith or belief in the truth of a set of ideas which are independent of specific situations' (Trow, 1993, p. 2). This view is based on Trow's analysis of the effectiveness of the policy of managerialism and the consequences of British higher education sector following this policy. According to Trow (1993), managerialism is critical of some norms and attitudes that marked out British universities and academics in the past, such as complacency and conservatism, administrative inefficiency, indifference to establishing links with industry and commerce or to broadening access to larger sectors of the population.

Both Pollitt and Trow perceive managerialism as a belief and as a technical activity. This reveals a concern with the importance of management for management's sake (Deem & Brehony, 2005). However, Deem & Brehony (2005) hold a perception that the move of the higher education sector towards the devolved management of public services and their marketisation is not only a technical but also a political activity, because this move is accompanied by both greater state regulation and is associated with imposed external accountability.

According to Dearlove (1997), Tapper (1998), and Tapper & Palfreyman (2002), the political connotation of managerialism can be retrieved from the publication of the Jarratt Report (1985) which explicitly expressed its opposition to collegial self-government, and the possibility that academic participation in governance would block necessary changes. In recommending that laymen should be more involved in governance, the Jarratt Report can be perceived as a sign of how the higher education sector was encouraged to move away from collegiality towards managerialism.

Similarly, Deem (2004) argues that state policies and funding regimes have



contributed to the new managerial permeation of universities, associated with change, for example, the high emphasis on the explicit management of core and support activities. Deem & Brehony (2005) interpret new managerialism as an ideological construction derived from practices once used by the private sector, and an ideological model of governmental and institutional order. In other words, new managerialism is 'a set of values, ideas and practices including marketisation, performance management, league tables, devolved budgets and targets, aimed at reforming the management of public service organizations' (Brehony & Deem, 2005, p.396). It is apparent that the notion of 'new managerialism' invokes not only relations of power and domination, associated with new kinds of imposed external accountability, but also language and discourse in that new managerialist language asserts that the solution to all public service problems is management (Deem & Brehony, 2005).

Deem's ESRC-funded project on 'new Managerialism and the management of UK Universities' reveals that the evident features of a 'new managerialism' in UK higher education are:

*Changes to the funding environment, academic work and workloads (more students, a smaller unit of resource per student and pressure to do both teaching and research to a high standard); more emphasis on team work in both teaching and research, partly in response to external audit; the introduction of cost-centres to university departments or faculties; greater internal and external surveillance of the performance of academics and an increase in the proportion of managers, both career administrators and manager-academics, in universities (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 225).*

This project reveals that new managerialism has brought about significant changes to the higher education sector. First, increasing the importance of management and management roles has caused organizational and cultural change, including changes to the perception of how management is done and why. For example, some

manager-academics see the academic community as a source of resistance, obstruction and frustration and many managers attempt to achieve change by 'wielding greater influence over new appointments and stressing new and tighter conditions of performance for existing staff' (Deem, 2000, p.5). Second, grass-root academics complained about being excluded from 'decisions affecting their work and the absence of transparency in the way things were done' (Deem, 2003, p.116). Third, there are different views about the use of technologies. Government ministers and officials see the wide use of technologies of devolved resources and workload allocation systems as easing workload, while academics see these technologies as adding to their workload (Brehony & Deem, 2005).

In sum, the rise and development of managerialism and new managerialism draws power away from the academic community to the managerial bodies both inside and outside the universities. New managerialism is intimately connected to the audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2000). Quality audits further legitimate the right of university managers to manage.

### **Section three: Academics facing value tensions**

However, academics are professionals believing in their authority that derives from a discipline-based professionalism (Dearlove, 1997). When quality audit makes some challenges to academic assumptions and values, academics resist or show hostility to this managerial control. This section analyzes the value tensions between managerial control and academics' professionalism in the process of quality audit in England: compliance versus diversity, distrust versus professionalism, accountability versus professionalism, and bureaucracy versus professionalism.

### **3.1 Compliance versus diversity**

The literature reveals that quality management has caused a compliance culture amongst academics, which contradicts their need for a diversity of approaches to teaching. One argument is that quality in higher education is associated with various manifestations of conforming behaviour (Newton, 2002), and that the quality movement in higher education demands compliance and performativity and the endless reproduction of norms (Morley, 2003). This rewards conformity and prevents academics from making changes to their teaching practice because the meaning of teaching quality has been transformed by the audit process. In order to be audited, the learning experience must be quantified and standardized so that it can be measured (Shore & Wright, 2000). As a result, the 'energy and ingenuity' of academic staff in UK higher education remain focused on 'how to get a good 'result' from whatever quality assurance process they face' (Brennan, 2001, p. 1). There is a fear among academics that this institutional compliance culture created by the requirements of the external assessment exercises in the UK would dampen creativity and slow down the responsiveness of the system to a rapidly changing environment (Harvey, 1995; Henkel, 2000; Kogan *et al.*, 2000).

### **3.2 Distrust versus professionalism**

Views on the link between trust and professionalism have varied over time. The general picture is that professionalism and trust were perceived to be related in the 1950s. Later on they were perceived to be disconnected in the critical analyses of professionalization processes. However, since the 1990s, there is an argument that trust is associated with professionalism. For example, both Parsons (1951) and Hughes (1958) relate trust to professionalism, emphasizing that professionals should be trusted because they are competent to think about and solve problems that fall in their domain. Parsons and Hughes perceive professionalism as occupational

cooperation, collegial employment and relations of trust based on competences. The origin of this notion of trust is in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when professionals, such as doctors, lawyers and clergymen, were trusted to provide altruistic advice within a community of mutually dependent middle class and upper-class clients (Evetts, 2006).

In contrast, Johnson (1972) does not relate trust to professionalism. He defines a profession as a method of controlling work and interprets professionalism as 'a successful ideology that has entered the political vocabulary of a wide range of occupational groups in their claims and competition for status and income' (Johnson, 1972, p, 32). Similarly, Larson (1977) does not see trust as an essential aspect of professionalism, but as an ideological control mechanism of the powerful occupational groups. This disregarding of trust in the professions can be explained by some medical and legal negligence and malpractice scandals. One example is the Dr Harold Shipman case, a medical doctor who was convicted of the mass murder of his patients. This case has resulted in renewed questioning of the association between trust and professionalism (Evetts, 2006). People have begun to treat some professions with suspicion.

However, since the 1990s, professionalism is again associated with trust. Evetts (2006) and Freidson (2001) argue that trust should be related to the professionals and that the trust of professionalism has been decreasing in the UK. Freidson (2001) refers to professionalism as the ideology of expertise and service and a special set of institutions. Freidson argues that professionalism is not only a unique form of occupational control of work but also a discourse to promote and to facilitate occupational change, and that trust is one value of professionalism. This suggests that trust in professionals matches the collegial value of high-trust and ethical commitment within the profession. The reason people consider collegiality as an ideal model of the profession is because of a widespread belief that collegiality can

result in mutual support, management and client trust (Hughes, 1958; Parsons, 1951, Freidson, 2001). (The characteristics of collegiality and its influence on the work of academics have been discussed in section two of this chapter.)

However, the adoption of quality audit in the higher education sector produces an argument that the work of academics is distrusted, and that the origin of quality audit is the distrust of government in the higher education sector (Morley, 2003; Trow, 1993). Martin Trow is amongst the first to associate the development of the external quality assessment with a withdrawal of the trust to the academic community. Trow (1993) argues that the 1991 White Paper (DES, 1991) represents massive distrust in the traditional professional ethic of continual enhancement of expertise and establishing practices in consultation with both peers and service-users. Eraut (1994) remarks, in a sarcastic way, that professional bodies used to exist to protect the public from unqualified non-professionals, but now they function to protect the public from the professionals themselves. As a result, issues of trust, authority and expertise had been disaggregated and routines have been subjected to scrutiny. Academics have lost some of their authoritative power but a new defensiveness is emerging (Eraut, 1994).

### **3.3 Accountability versus professionalism**

In England, with the demand for higher education institutions to become accountable in the use of publicly generated resources (Walden, 1996), the quest for greater accountability to the public has penetrated the lives of academics. In theory, the culture of accountability can make academics and institutions more accountable to the public, but O'Neill (2000a, 2000b) argues that the real requirements of accountability are accountability to regulators, to government departments, to funders and to legal standards. Similarly, among academics there is a perception that

the concept of accountability has been used within government policy to justify, legitimate and to implement the structures and technologies that seek external leverage and control over academic institutions and professionals (Johnson, 2000a). This perception accounts for the academics' resistance to the concept of accountability.

On one hand, the demand for accountability reflects the greatly increased scale and cost of higher education and increasing customer awareness (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001). The UK Government holds that taxpayers have the right to know their money is being spent economically, efficiently, and effectively, so the public investment in higher education is required to 'justify closer scrutiny of the outcomes achieved by publicly funded institutions and from students who expect to receive good quality teaching and sufficient learning resources to meet their needs' (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001, p. 6). However, there is a worry that this might result in performance assessments acting only as proxy for consumer satisfaction (Johnson, 2000b).

On the other hand, the demand for accountability has made universities 'accommodate themselves to public policies as determined by the Government' (Salter & Tapper, 1994, p. 202), not only 'in terms of their conformity to legally acceptable process but also in terms of performance' (Power, 1999, p. 44). In theory the culture of accountability aims to make professionals and institutions more accountable for good performance, but quality audit focuses on things that are easily measurable, and the performance indicators that the audit chooses are for ease of measurement and control rather than measuring accurately what the quality of performance is (O'Neill, 2000a, 2000b). For example, universities attach significance to annual reports, prospectuses and web-sites in order to demonstrate their organizational efficiency, but academics perceive these symbols as superficial, because they give little indication of the internal values, cultures and practices of

teaching and research. The academics thus perceive this quality management as a burden on time, financial and administrative resources (Johnson, 2000a).

It is obvious that accountability has been related to customer culture and with the requirement for academic performance. However, the requirement for performance might have influenced academics' ability to judge and to control their work, because academics as professionals prefer to manage and control their own work. This reveals a tension between accountability and academics' professionalism. Another tension is that accountability makes it difficult for academics to engage with colleagues in serious interdisciplinary debate about the quality of provision, because of the standardization required by audit. This contradicts the characteristics of professions in that the creation of a sense of community and a willingness to examine values openly are the necessary conditions within which questions relating to quality can be taken seriously (Nixon, 1996). Nixon's argument is based on his interviews with academics in England on how they understand what makes for good practice and what institutional conditions are necessary for such practice to flourish. Similar criticism is voiced by O'Neill (2000a, 2000b), arguing that the emphasis upon accountability has in fact undermined trust by constraining and weakening professional practices, and damaged professional pride and integrity. These views suggest that the accountability movement does not square with the intrinsic goals and targets of the institution, so when required to conform to it, academics use their collegial values to protect the interests of their own profession.

### **3.4 Bureaucracy versus professionalism**

This section aims to describe the characteristics of bureaucracy, and analyze the tension between bureaucracy and academic professionalism. According to Max Weber, bureaucracy is 'the means of transforming social actions into rationally

organized action' (Roth, G. & Wittich, C., 1968, p. 987). Watson (2003) explains further that bureaucracy is 'the control and co-ordination of work tasks through a hierarchy of appropriately qualified office holders, whose authority derives from their expertise and who rationally devise a system of rules and procedures that are calculated to provide the most appropriate means of achieving specified ends' (p. 86).

Weber compares earlier forms of administration with bureaucracy and holds that bureaucracy is efficient, because of its impersonality, concentration of the means of administration, a leveling effect on social and economic differences and implementation of a system of authority that is practically indestructible. Weber summarizes the main characteristics of bureaucracy as:

- 'There is the principle of official jurisdictional areas, which are generally ordered by rules' (p. 956).
- 'The principles of office hierarchy and of channels of appeal stipulate a clearly established system of super- and sub-ordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones (p. 957).
- 'The management of the modern office is based upon written documents' (p. 957).
- Office management usually presupposes thorough training in a field of specialization. When the office is fully developed, official activity demands the full working capacity of the official, irrespective of the fact the length of his obligatory working hours in the bureau may be limited.
- The management of the office follows general rules. It involves jurisprudence, administrative or business management (Roth, and Wittich, 1968).

Watson (2003) presents the appeal of bureaucracy as two-fold:



- 'Fairness in the distribution of posts and rewards, particularly in the sphere of public administration.... By the following of procedural neutrality and impartiality, the old evils of favoritism, nepotism and capriciousness would be removed.
- Efficiency both in state administration and in industrial enterprises. Great promise was seen in terms of output and quality if large organisations could be administered on the basis of clear procedures, expertise and co-ordinated human efforts.' (p. 86)

It is evident that both Weber and Watson perceived the bureaucratic model as the most accurate approximation of how the administrative organization of an institution functions. They see the bureaucracy originally has a technical and neutral meaning, with the characteristics of hierarchy of authority and the presence of rules. However, there is an indication that academics are opposed to bureaucracy. For example, the increased bureaucracy due to quality audit has become a concern in the higher education sector (Harvey, 2005; Kogan, *et al.*, 2000).

### **3.4.1 Tension between bureaucracy and academic professionalism**

Kogan, *et al.* (2000) compare the change processes in higher education in the UK, Sweden and Norway during the 1990s and reveal that external quality management has become an important contributor to increased 'bureaucratisation'. Similarly, Harvey (2005) points out that these external pressures have required institutions to develop elaborate and comprehensive internal procedures to audit the practice of academic and central departments, and that both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms are so complicated that they have contributed to the increase of bureaucracy in some degree. The General Secretary of the Association of University Teachers (2002) reminds people that the burden of bureaucracy has

reached unmanageable proportions, and that staff are increasingly prevented from getting on with their jobs because of the amount of 'red tape' they have to deal with. ('Red tape' is a derisive term for excessive regulations or rigid conformity to formal rules that are considered redundant/ bureaucratic and hinders/ prevents action or decision-making.)

These researches suggest that academics are anti-bureaucratic and that academics perceive bureaucracy differently from Weber. The meaning of bureaucracy has gone beyond being neutral in the context of the higher education sector in England. Bureaucracy has become a term associated with the defects of large organizations applying rules to cases (Kogan, *et al.*, 2000). As a result, some occupational changes promoted and facilitated by professionalism, such as more paper work and additional responsibilities would be interpreted by academics as increased bureaucratization caused by quality audit.

One implication of these findings is that academics show strong resistance to quality audit. They might have regarded professionalism as an ideology which helps their occupation to gain 'monopoly of competence legitimized by officially sanctioned 'expertise', and 'a monopoly of credibility with the public' (Larson, p.38). When quality audit is perceived as an instrument of control, academics will use the ideology of professionalism to fight against the audit to maintain and regain the monopoly of their expertise (their subject/discipline knowledge) and their social status. In this case, it is likely that academics would blame quality audit for increased bureaucratization in their institutions. This also suggests that academics possess an idealized notion of a profession linked to collegiality which is supposed to boost their professionalism and differs from bureaucracy advocated by managerialism. Another implication is that bureaucracy questions professional discretion, one value of collegiality, because bureaucracy puts an emphasis on hierarchy and requires people

to follows generalised rules. However, in the view of academics, bureaucracy would reduce their freedom to make judgements or decide what to do, and would prevent them exercising independent judgement.

In contrast, Larson (1977) holds a different view that the bureaucratic phenomenon does not conflict with the model of professions, because bureaucracy and professionalism are complementary models of work organization and two subtypes of rational administration. In Larson's words, bureaucracy helps to develop professionalism and creates the structural context of successful professionalisation. For example, large-scale bureaucratic organizations can transform the social matrix of professionalisation, providing the climate of ideological legitimation for both old and new professions, and providing models, sponsorship, equipment, and resources (Larson, 1977).

It is inevitable that professionalism would produce some organizational change, which includes bureaucracy (Kogan, 1999). After analyzing the changes in the infrastructure of higher education institutions, Kogan points out that the higher education sector is not bureaucracy free, because in all the institutions there are mixtures of collegial, academic-based decision making, and bureaucratic/hierarchical working, 'therefore collegial working is not simply a coming together of peers, but is itself structured into hierarchical and bureaucratic formats' (Kogan, 1999, p. 270). ...

*'A lot of decision making process will inevitably become bureaucratized. For example, curricula, assessment procedures and the like are monitored by administrators to ensure that they fall within existing policies and are consistent with practices being developed in the rest of the university (Kogan, 1999, p. 271).*

In the view of Larson (1977), the alleged conflict between profession and bureaucracy is actually a contrast between the structure of bureaucratic organizations

and an ideology promoted by some of the members of the profession. In the higher education context, Larson's theory implies that some academics still hold an ideological conception that their profession should be a community with democratic mutual supervision over internalized common standards, without considering the fact that the shift from collegiality to managerialism has led higher education institutions into more bureaucratic structures. These structures transfer the power or authority from the organization to the individual. The impersonal organizational power becomes that of a person as long as he or she occupies that role, but the power is not a property of the person, because it is not separable from the organization (Larson, 1977). In contrast, the academic profession would like to maintain indeterminate cognitive areas in order to assert the uniqueness of individual capacities, but collectively, they solicit trust in individual professionals and individual freedom from external controls. The knowledge and internalized ethical norms the academics offer to the public in exchange for its trust emphasizes the academics' individuality and illustrates the essential individualism of the professional ideology. Therefore, this individualism is one of the powerful factors that make academic professions appear to be anti-bureaucracy (Larson, 1977).

These perceived value tensions have made the notion of academic work as a single profession problematic. Maybe it is time for academics to re-define their professionalism in terms of their underlying commitments and purposes (Nixon & Marks, 2001). Based on analyses of the influence of changed working conditions on the roles of the academics, Nixon & Ranson (1997) and Nixon & Marks (2001) argue that academia should become a learning profession and that academics' professionalism should not be defined in terms of status and self-regulation, but rather in terms of values and practices. What they meant is that academic professionalism should be based on shared understandings and open dialogue because of the changed context of the higher education sector, such as, greater degree of institutional specification, a more diversified academic workforce, significantly

increased student numbers, marketisation, quality and the quality audit movement.

According to Nixon & Ranson (1997), this changed context has made the institutions 'associated with "the learning society": television, the new technology, the printed word, new social movements, etc' (p.207), so if academics want to exert their professional influence, they would have to 'look to their own institutional boundaries and to how they might mediate their own professional interests beyond those boundaries' (p. 207). In other words, academic professionalism should be based 'not only on academics' ability to 'profess' their own professional values, but also on their capacity to receive and work with the values of others' (p. 207), such as parents, students, and the local and national community.

Nixon & Ranson (1997) and Nixon & Marks (2001) explain this new professionalism further as a capacity of academics to be extroverted, generous and knowledgeable in their relations with professional colleagues, other professional groups and the public. They describe characteristics of this new professionalism as new forms of agreement-making that seek to reinforce the primacy of the relation between professionals and their publics, and the need to ground that relation in an ongoing dialogue regarding the ends and purposes of learning. This suggests that Nixon & Ranson (1997) and Nixon & Marks (2001) regard the expert service of the academic profession as a service to the public, with the potential aim also of meeting the accountability requirement of higher education institutions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the phenomenon of professionalism as it appears in contemporary society, analyzed its characteristics and distinguished it from an occupation. Three different views on the nature of academic work have been

presented and discussed: academic work as a profession, academic work as a vocation, and teaching as a way of life. Of these views academic work as a profession has been commonly accepted, instead of the fact that there are some differences between academic work and the traditional profession. However, the shift from collegiality to managerialism has contributed to value tensions in the work of academics particularly in relation to quality audit in England. Four value tensions have been discussed and analyzed: the compliance culture produced by the audit culture constrains variety in teaching practice, a perceived decreased trust from the government conflicts with the professionalism of academics, the requirement of accountability undermines academic professional practice and finally the academics' ideal conception of their profession produces an anti-bureaucracy sentiment. This chapter ends with an assumption that it is time for academics to become a learning profession, in order to meet the needs of the communities they serve (Nixon & Marks, 2001).

## **Chapter 5: Reviewing the Impact of Quality Audit on the Work of Academics**

### **Introduction**

After an overview of academic work as a profession in England in the previous chapter, this chapter then reviews the various ways in which different forms of quality assurance mechanisms for teaching might have affected the work of academics. One reason for analyzing the perceived impact of quality assurance mechanisms is because of the close relationship between audit and quality assurance mechanisms. Because audit works as a control of control (Power, 1994, 1997), quality assurance mechanisms imposed upon the institution form an external control and check the performance of the quality assurance mechanisms within the institution. The internal mechanisms, in turn, regulate the work of academics. Therefore this chapter first highlights and reviews academic debates about the individual quality assurance mechanisms, then looks at the general perceived impact of quality audit as a whole on the work of academics.

### **Section one: Debates on quality assurance mechanisms**

As the context chapter suggests, there are a variety of quality assurance mechanisms imposed upon institutions by external agencies and separately created within the institutions themselves, of which student course evaluation, peer observation, and external examining are most frequently discussed in the literature. The following section is going to present and analyze debates on these individual mechanisms.

#### **1.1 Student course evaluation**

Student course evaluation is known by a variety of terms including, for example,

student feedback. Student evaluation constitutes information which can be used by lecturers, students, and other stakeholders of higher education when examining or selecting programmes or course units (Richardson, 2005). It has become a common practice to evaluate the quality of teaching in English higher education institutions. Academics often use this evaluation to support their applications for appointment or promotion.

However, academics hold mixed views with regard to the impact of student course evaluation on teaching. A range of researchers draw attention to the significance and importance of evaluation for improving teaching. Their arguments are: that evaluation is an important mechanism in teaching (Lecky & Neville, 2001; Wilson *et al*, 1997), and evaluation appears to have improved teaching performance (Moore & Kuol, 2005; Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Timpson & Andrew, 1997; Wilson *et al*, 1997). However, some other researchers have little faith in evaluation for several reasons: flawed evaluation methods (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; King *et al*, 1999), students' incompetence in completing evaluation forms (Rowley, 2003), and alleged lack of contribution of the evaluation towards academics' professional development (Fisher *et al.*, 1998; Johnson, 2000b; Pratt, 1997; Saroyan & Mundsén, 2001). There is also an argument that the evaluation is not always treated seriously by the institution (Harvey, *et al*, 1997; Richardson, 2005). These different views will be analysed below.

### **1.1.1 Importance of evaluation to teaching**

Wilson *et al* (1997) suggests that student course evaluation is a valid, reliable and useful indicator of teaching quality, because it can provide crucial information about course quality for funding agencies, universities, prospective students and employers of graduates. The importance of evaluation is confirmed by Lecky & Neville (2001) who analyse student course evaluation approaches adopted by British universities.



Lecky & Neville argue that the evaluation information is important to teaching in the following ways: assisting academic staff to enhance the quality of their teaching performance, measuring teaching effectiveness for use in administrative decision-making, informing students and assisting their decision-making when selecting a course of study, and informing research on teaching.

There is widespread belief as well as evidence that student course evaluation can be used to improve academics' teaching practice. Timpson & Andrew (1997) reveal that student evaluation has promoted continuous instructional improvements, and that it permits more analysis and discussion among students, teachers and administrators. There is evidence that academics take the evaluation seriously and have been making changes according to the results of student course evaluation (Moore & Kuol, 2005, Nasser & Fresko, 2002), such as changing course assignments, organization of the course, and use of instructional strategies, but the usefulness of the evaluation to improve lecturing varies by instructional area and by reported evaluation results (Nasser & Fresko, 2002).

### **1.1.2 Debates on validity of evaluation**

In spite of the argument that student course evaluation is important and has improved teaching practice, it has not been well received by some other researchers. One debate is on the validity of student course evaluation to teaching. Douglas & Douglas' (2006) interviews with staff within a business school of a post – 1992 UK university indicate that staff have very little faith in the validity of student feedback questionnaires due to three main reasons. First, many of the questions were so subjective that responses would be influenced by personal prejudice. Second, the questionnaire aimed to measure student's satisfaction with a given module, but many questions were irrelevant to the delivery of that module. Third, the questionnaires were open to abuse by students because they were completed after their assignments

had been graded and returned to them. This meant that students might deliberately give low ratings as an act of 'revenge' for low assignment marks.

The competence of the students to evaluate teaching is also raised and discussed by Rowley (2003). Rowley theoretically analyses a range of issues in relation to the collection of student feedback on modules and courses, and points out that when students evaluate teaching, they are influenced by different variables, such as their ethnic background, gender and age, the size of the class, the centrality of the course (compulsory or optional), and instructor characteristics, (rank, experience, reputation, research skills, gender, minority status, and physical appearance).

Similarly, King *et al's* (1999) survey of student feedback systems at Loughborough University Business School in the UK suggest that academics perceive the feedback method as flawed, and that academics perceived students as not competent to give reliable feedback. The examples academics quoted are: significant numbers of questionnaires are not correctly completed; some student representatives cannot represent the student body because they do not have the ability and opportunity to find out their cohort's views before meetings and then pass feedback to their cohort afterwards; there is a disinclination among students to feed back sensible responses, because they either have little knowledge of or little interest in the purposes of this evaluation, and because students have little confidence that their comments would make a difference to their units, especially if they see the same problems recurring year on year.

The above examples suggest that there are some flaws in relying too heavily on student feedback. In examining how student evaluation was practised at the University of Central England, Harvey, *et al* (1997) argues that one reason why some students become sceptical of and are unwilling to participate in the evaluation is because the institution does not deal with the evaluation seriously. The examples are: the evaluation may not be properly analysed; the evaluation may be analysed but is

lost in reports with statistics and tables that give little guidance for action and has limited circulation in the university; the students may not be informed about any actions resulting from their input. Harvey's view is shared by Richardson (2005) who reviews the research literature concerning the use of student feedback and points out that students' lack of attention to the evaluation result is due to four main reasons: the lack of guidance to teachers, managers and administrators on how the evaluation result should be interpreted; the lack of external incentives to reward good feedback or punish poor feedback; the fact that the results of the evaluation are not published to assure the students that action is to be or being taken; and ambiguity about the ownership of feedback data. These factors have caused academics to be less willing to act on the results of feedback, and have made students critical of the value of the evaluation.

Another explanation for the lack of attention to student course evaluation is because academics and students have different views of good teaching. For example, academics may focus on challenging students and developing independent learners, while students may focus on instrumental concerns about passing exams (Fisher *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, the evaluation emphasizes a process of receiving and reacting to summative measures. Its outcomes are assumed meaningful and informative at face value, but academics do not perceive the outcomes as helpful to their professional development (Saroyan & Mundsén, 2001).

### **1.1.3 Impact of evaluation on power relations between academics and students**

Except for the debates on the validity of student course evaluation, there is a perception among academics that student course evaluation is a source of authority and a device to curb the power of academics over students (Johnson, 2000a). Not only Johnson but also Macfarlane (2004a) holds the view that academics possess power over student lives. According to Macfarlane, the assessment of student work

places academics in a unique position to influence the class of degree a student receives, which in consequence will influence their future career prospects, but student course evaluation intervenes in the power relations between academics and students by putting power in student hands. Macfarlane (2004a) shows his concern that student course evaluation could prevent academics from being open about their own sense of incompleteness, mistakes and confusion, and can make academics feel alienated and threatened by the results of such evaluation, leading to them adopting a dismissive attitude to evaluation.

Similar views appear in Johnson (2000a) who investigates the use of student course evaluation for the professional development of lecturers in the UK. Johnson finds that student course evaluation used internally for management appraisal can damage relationships between students and lecturers because it does not encourage individual academics to actively progress their own professional development. Instead the lecturers evaluated were likely to perceive the evaluation as surveillance, as a 'consumer 'complaints' form that induces cruel banalities from students and generates a level of bad-faith tinged with nervous anxiety on the part of the lecturer.' (Johnson, 2000a, p.430)

## **1.2 Peer observation**

Together with student course evaluation, peer observation of teaching is regarded as another opportunity for academics to reflect on their teaching practice. Peer observation generally involves peers observing each other's teaching, in order to help academics examine their teaching for self-improvement and to establish good practice to enhance student learning (Lomas & Kinchin, 2006).

There are different ways to interpret the origin of peer observation. One view is that peer observation is a political and cultural drive to raise teaching quality via the

development and sharing of good practice (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005; Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; Shortland, 2004). The other view is that the adoption of peer observation reveals a worry that relying on student evaluation only is not sufficient to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across departments (Douglas & Douglas, 2006), because teaching is 'a complex, cognitive ability that is not innate but can be both learned and improved upon' (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001, p. 344).

A study of the literature suggests that whether peer observation improves teaching practice is a debate. On the one hand, there is an indication that academics are reluctant to engage with the peer observation process (Bell, 2001; Cockburn, 2005; Shortland, 2004), because they do not find it useful in improving their teaching practice, (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Peel, 2005). On the other hand, some other researchers suggest that peer observation has improved teaching, such as, Allen (2002), Bell (2001), Cockburn (2005), and Fletcher & Orsmond (2004).

### **1.2.1 Academics' resistance to peer observation**

There are four main factors contributing to academics' resistance to peer observation: academics' perceived value of peer observation, flawed methods of peer observation, the usage of observation, and an academic's length of service in higher education. These four factors are analyzed below.

First of all, how academics perceive the values of peer observation has significantly influenced academics' acceptance of peer observation. If academics perceive peer observation as a tool to meet the demand of external quality assurance bodies, academics would regard it as either a coercive quality assurance instrument to hold them to account (Cockburn 2005), or a managerial control to drive them to complete forms and records in order to provide evidence of participation in the observation scheme (Shortland, 2004). However, if academics perceive the evaluation as an

opportunity to improve their own teaching practice and the educational experience of learners, academics are likely to become supportive of peer observation (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Cockburn 2005).

The second factor that explains academics' resistance to peer observation is the perception that the method of observation is flawed. Cockburn (2005) reveals that his respondents were critical of the credibility of the observer and the way the act of peer observation changes the 'on-stage' behaviour of teachers and students. Cockburn's respondents pointed out that the classroom competence and personality of observer can influence the result of the observation, and that the observation might reduce the complexity of teaching to a set of technical skills, which are deployed in a way absent of expressive interpretation.

Other factors contributing to academics' resistance of peer observation are the use of observation and the length of service of academics in higher education. Bell (2001) reveals that when peer observation is used as a form of appraisal to judge the observee's level of competence, academics would show resistance to it because academics feel that the observation does not reflect the full, complex reality of their teaching. Similarly, Douglas & Douglas' (2006) case study, exploring how academics in a UK business school think of peer observation, suggests that academics' resistance is connected with their length of service in the higher education. Douglas found that most academics who have been working in higher education for over 3 years would negatively endure the process of peer observation, and that the staff who have been academics for less than 3 years would regard peer observation as an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching. This might be because the latter group feel that they are still on a 'learning curve' and still need to develop their own teaching approach.

### **1.2.2 Impact of peer observation on teaching**

Allen's (2002) survey of three post-1992 universities and a university college in the UK reveals that there are mixed views about how peer observation has affected teaching. One argument is that peer observation has improved teaching practice (Bell, 2001; Cockburn, 2005; Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). In contrast, there is suspicion about the positive impact of teaching observation (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Peel, 2005).

Bell (2001) suggests that peer observation helps develop and implement new ideas about teaching, improve teaching practice and makes academics feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of the process. According to Bell, three kinds of changes can occur among academics after their peer observation: technical, pedagogical, and critical changes, which are analyzed below. The technical changes mean improving either the use of visual aids or the structuring of information. The pedagogical changes refer to the implementation of interactive learning strategies. The critical changes mean academics' adoption of reflective practices which are normally made by those who want to develop strategies for ongoing professional improvement. Bell finds that technical changes often happen to relatively inexperienced teachers and to those who are trying to improve their transmission of ideas to students. This finding is confirmed by Fletcher & Orsmond (2004) who demonstrate that the observation may be perceived as a useful learning tool, especially when less experienced staff act as observers of more experienced staff because they can gain from seeing good practice in operation, although there is a possibility that the less experienced staff may learn the bad habits of some more experienced staff.

Except for improving teaching practice, Cockburn (2005) finds that peer observation can be useful in boosting academics' self-esteem and confidence, because it provides support and help for academics who are struggling with their teaching and who have lost direction in their teaching, therefore it gives academics a fresh perspective on

teaching, and enhances teaching skills by improving academics' delivery and organisational skills. Cockburn reveals that the observer in general benefits more from observing others than from being observed. Because the observer is free of the classroom responsibilities experienced by the teacher, the observer can devote all their attention to reflecting on different methods and techniques.

While some claim that peer observation leads to improvements in teaching techniques, others are suspicious about its true intentions. One argument is that peer observation is not sufficient to enhance teaching performance in the classroom, because improved teaching is more likely to occur when academics are actively engaging with the pedagogical theory of their disciplines, critical reflection on classroom practice, and a challenging of assumptions through shared critical reflection with colleagues, rather than simply meeting external demands (Douglas & Douglas, 2006). This argument suggests that peer observation is perceived as meeting external demands, although peer observation is intended to be a developmental tool for academics. Another argument against peer observation is that academics generally do not like to provide negative criticism to undermine their colleagues' confidence, so peer observation is not useful in improving academics' teaching practice (Peel, 2005). However, Peel's account is based on his personal experience of peer observation, so whether his view is typical or not needs to be explored.

### **1.3 The external examining system**

The external examining system has become another crucial and frequently discussed mechanism of quality assurance in UK higher education (Gaunt, 1999). However, from a historical perspective, external examining has been independent of quality assurance bodies (Harvey, 2005) because the main traditional roles of external examiners have been to ensure that degrees awarded in similar subjects are



comparable in standard across higher education institutions, and to ensure that students are dealt with fairly in the system of assessment and classification (Silver *et al*, 1995).

However, the expansion of higher education, the increasing diversity of the sector and of institutional missions, and the increasing demand for public accountability has led to the external examiner system coming under scrutiny in the UK (Gaunt, 1999). In the early 1990s, the Higher Education Quality Council commissioned the Quality Support Centre (QSC) of the Open University to undertake a project to examine the effectiveness and future of the external examining system. This project revealed that the external examining system was expected to become an integral and essential part of institutional quality assessment. Both the UFC and the HEQC relied strongly on external examining in forming their judgements. They scrutinized external examiners' reports provided by the institution, and then recommended that external examining should be strengthened, and that issues of the purpose, scale and nature of an institution's internal assessment should be addressed (Silver *et al*, 1995). Given concerns about variations in academic standards, the 1997 Dearing Report, commissioned by the UK government, proposed an enhanced role for external examiners in relation to outcomes, promulgated guidelines on external examining, and recommended a national register and training of external examiners and publication of their reports. Later on, the Quality Assurance Agency included the external examining as a code of practice in their Academic Infrastructure, which serves to provide public information on academic standards, and to help assure quality of assessment processes and to maintain academic standards at the level of the subjects (QAA, 2007). All the above evidence suggests that the external examining system has become a formalized quality assurance mechanism in the context of quality audit.

However, Hannan & Silver (2006) reveal that academics generally resist attempts to make the external examining system more formal in function by opposing attempts

to impose a national system of training of the external examiners because of two reasons. One is because the external examiner needs to understand the course needs and the culture of the institution. The other is because externals are subjected to increased pressures on their time as academics, which can affect their availability and desire to act as external examiners.

In spite of academics' resistance to making external examining more formal, many academics are still interested in becoming external examiners. According to Hannan & Silver (2006), academics regard the external examining system as part of their professional or career development, so they are committed to what the system represents and are motivated to become external examiners. One motivation for academics choosing to become an examiner is because of their preference of the culture of collegiality and of being a critical friend, which enables them to get 'a sense of involvement in a higher education system or culture and the concomitant need to give and receive service' (Hannan & Silver, 2006, p. 62). Another motivation for being an external examiner is academics' subject loyalty which enables them to make a comparison of standards within subjects/disciplines and across institutions (Silver *et al*, 1995). According to Silver, being an examiner also provides academics with a chance to relate to other academics in the same subject area, and to build up a personal profile in the field as well as enhancing the reputation of their own institution. Other motivation for being external examiners includes the chance to improve one's curriculum vitae (Hannan & Silver, 2006) because being an external examiner implies that the person is an expert of their designated subject/discipline and has 'sufficient experience and seniority to be able to make judgements about standards in an evolving system' (Silver *et al*, 1995, p.12).

Academics' strong interest in becoming external examiners and comparison of standards at the subject level could be perceived as the strengths of external examining. However, there are four main weaknesses of external examining, which are discussed and analyzed by Silver *et al* (1995) below:

Firstly, although there is a hope that external examining can contribute to the comparability of standards for students across courses and disciplines, and to bench-marking national standards, there is lack of consistency in assessment and its criteria, and disparities in degree results across subjects, institutions and time, so the comparison of external examining across institutions is possible only with subjects or disciplines.

Secondly, the expanded role of external examiners has produced a greater burden of work for them. For example, external examiners are expected to take on a consultative role, such as assistance in internal institutional reviews, which aims to contribute to course development and quality control and assurance. However, the expanded role of external examiners, together with modularization, semesterisation, increased student numbers, and changes in the assessments of students, has increased the workload of examiners. Silver *et al* (1995) also showed their concern that the expanded role of external examiners might result in a closer relationship between the institution and the examiners, which might reduce the objectivity and independence of the examiner.

Thirdly, remuneration of external examiners is low, which could cause obstacles to academics' effective participation in external examining and to the place of external examining in the role of academics in general.

Fourthly, different institutional traditions affect the examiner appointment process, examiner reports and the perception of the role of examiners. Thus, how the examiner carries out their role varies between programmes and institutions.

In spite of the above weaknesses, external examining remains an essential feature of the British higher education system, but it is not regarded as the only source of comparability of standards. For example, course validation and review, as well as

accreditation, also play a part (Silver *et al*, 1995). Therefore, Silver perceives external examining as an additional pillar of the quality assessment process.

## **Section two: Impact of quality audit on the work of academics**

The above debates on the individual quality assurance mechanisms reveal that quality audit in the higher education sector has become a source of controversy. One explanation is that underlying the operation of audit are issues of power and values (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Another explanation is that quality audit is a kind of power control over academics (Morley, 2003), and that quality audit embodies a new rationality and morality and is designed to engender among academic staff new norms of conduct and professional behaviour (Shore & Wright, 2000). With consideration of the various view of quality audit, this section is going to report and analyze the literature on how quality audit has affected the work of academics, especially with regard to undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curricula, power relations between academics and students, and academics' general workload.

### **2.1 Impact of audit on teaching**

There are two opposite opinions on how quality audit has affected undergraduate classroom teaching practice. One is that audit is a pointless process because it focuses on measurement, external accountability and regulatory control. Academics do not have a sense of ownership of the audit process, and academics do not feel responsible for audit (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2005). Some academics even perceive audit as having delivered a better deal for students than staff, such as highlighting the technology aspects of teaching due to student questionnaires, and increased opportunities for students to participate in committee meetings (Newton, 2000). As a result, academics adopt a compliant attitude to audit rather than attempt to bring about a change in the learner or in the institution (Srikanthan & Dalrymple,

2003). Moreover, audit is argued to have diverted academic staff time towards administrative jobs, so it may have actually undermined the quality of teaching and learning (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Morley, 2003; Newton, 2000; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

The other view is that quality audit has produced a positive impact on teaching in the UK, such as, more awareness of the importance and practice of good teaching (Brennan *et al.*, 1997; Dill, 2001). Brennan *et al.* (1997) find that increased institutional attention has been paid towards teaching and learning, especially the quality of teaching. There are more active discussions and co-operation within academic units, and a better clarified responsibility for improving teaching and student learning and provision of better information on best practice (Dill, 2001).

The mixed views expressed above on the impact of quality audit on teaching accord well with the findings about how individual quality assurance mechanisms have affected teaching (section 1.1.1 & section 2.2.1). Because teaching is closely related to the curriculum, the following section presents literature on how quality audit has affected the curriculum.

## **2.2 Impact on curriculum**

Barnett and his colleagues conducted research on changing patterns of undergraduate curriculum in the UK. He conceptualized key patterns of change in the undergraduate curriculum, proposed models for configuring the main components of curriculum, and revealed that the control of curriculum was closely related to quality audit (Barnett, 2000; Barnett, *et al.*, 2001; Barnett & Coate, 2005).

The view of Barnett is that the curriculum has become market oriented, customerized, and outcome-based, due to the increasing influence of outside interests. One

perceived influence is the massification of UK higher education, where students have been recast as consumers of their education. Courses are designed to offer skills and knowledge that attract students who want to compete in the labour market, so contemporary curricula have become guided by consumer demand (Barnett, *et al.*, 2001).

Another perceived influence on curriculum is the QAA. Barnett argues that the QAA has put the curriculum under scrutiny and has led the curriculum to move from a subject-based to an outcome-based model (Barnett, *et al.*, 2001; Barnett & Coate, 2005). One example is that the QAA uses subject benchmarking statements to provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specified subject (see context chapter). The benchmarking statements are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject area, but set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas, describing what gives a discipline coherence and identity. In this way, the benchmarking statements define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject (QAA, 2007a). Therefore, subject benchmarks have encouraged transparency and accountability in curriculum design and delivery (Barnett, *et al.*, 2001).

Together with the benchmark statement, the programme specification, a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme (QAA, 2007b), has been used by the QAA to 'require all course designers to indicate how their curriculum can be referenced and measured against these benchmarks' (Barnett & Coate, 2005, p. 28).

However, Barnett & Coate (2005) perceive both the subject benchmarking statements and programme specification as an 'attempt to impose an external agenda and order on an expanding curriculum that had become difficult to measure in terms of its value' (p.29). This control has made the curriculum become performativity -

oriented: 'an increasing emphasis in higher education on use-value, rather than knowledge for its own sake' (Barnett, *et al*, 2001, p. 445). In other words, the concept of curriculum becomes 'hinged significantly around learning outcomes, and these understood in terms of students' skills, especially those oriented towards employability' (Barnett & Coate, 2005, p. 23).

Barnett shows a concern that this outcome approach of curriculum has become a recent development for some subject areas, and that many of the professional subject areas are more accustomed to developing curricula in relation to external requirements. Curricula are therefore pulled in different directions. One is the desire to maintain the depth of a university education, to preserve the disciplines, and to produce disciplinary specialists. The other is to meet external demands for a useful, functional curriculum product (Barnett & Coate, 2005). As a result, the academic hegemony in shaping the curricula in their separate knowledge field is dissolving in the UK (Barnett, 2000). Skills, such as knowledge and understanding skills, generic intellectual skills and personal transferable skills, have become a dominant element in the curriculum (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

To summarize, Barnett's research reveal a shift from a traditional curriculum which focuses on the discipline to an emerging curriculum which focuses on a need for transferable skills with intrinsic and marketable value. Although the QAA is perceived to have controlled the curriculum, the QAA is only part of quality audit. Some other factors could also have influence on curriculum, so it is hard to tell the extent to which quality audit has changed the curriculum.

### **2.3 Impact on power relation between academics and students**

Except for the control of the curriculum, quality audit is generally perceived by researchers to have influenced power relations between academics and students,

especially with the adoption of student course evaluation which puts power in the hands of the students (section 1.1.4. this chapter). This potentially changed power relation suggests a trend to treat students as customers in the UK.

### **2.3.1 Student as customers**

The expansion of higher education, the adoption of the undergraduate 'top - up' tuition fees in England from September 2006 (students paying towards the cost of their education and most students are paying £3000 per year), as well as the widespread use of quality audit in the higher education sector have provided a context for the debates on students as customers in the UK. There is evidence that the UK government tends to perceive students as customers, and encourages universities to adopt systems, structures and organisational cultures present in most commercial service organisations to embrace the customer-orientation (Lomas, 2007).

First, the Dearing Committee in 1997 made reference to the development of a customer consciousness:

*There is now greater emphasis on recognition of the individual as customer or consumer. People's expectations of publicly funded services have arisen and they no longer accept unquestioningly what is offered. (Dearing, 1997: 64, 4.59)*

Second, the UK government has been taking measures to ensure that universities provide as much information as possible to current students, potential students, their parents, government agencies and employers (see context chapter). One example of information provision is that the QAA sets up a variety of quality assurance mechanisms to help existing students measure the quality of provision that they are receiving and to assist prospective students to make informed choices about which universities to attend. Another example is that HEFCE (2002) recommends that universities publish information about quality and standards of learning and teaching, which includes summaries of external examiners' reports, outcomes of student



satisfaction surveys, summaries of learning and teaching strategies, and the results of major programme reviews. This recommendation emphasizes providing information for the students and perceives the students as one stakeholder of the higher education system. These measures enable students to express their views on the education and services they receive and influence university decision-making, encouraging a culture of students as customers in the higher education sector (Lomas, 2007).

Third, the case for treating the students as customers is further supported by a statement in the HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003–2008 that,

*... students increasingly see themselves as consumers, entitled to agreed standards of provision and to full information about the quality of what is provided (HEFCE, 2003, para. 3).*

Fourth, the National Student Survey (NSS) introduced by the HEFCE is perceived by Douglas & Douglas (2006) to have given further credence to the concept of student as customer (See Chapter 2 for details).

### **2.3.2 Academics' doubts on students as customers**

The subject benchmark statement and programme specifications suggest that the UK government has been using public service management strategies to direct and to control the work of universities (Henkel, 2000) in order to make universities become a service provider (Lomas, 2007). However, quite a few academic researchers cast doubts on the notion of university as service provider because students are not customers (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 1999; Harvey, 2002; Lomas, 2007; Macfarlane, 2004a; Morley, 2003; Sharrock, 2000, etc). A popular view among them is that students are different from the conventional customers who can choose and decide what they like because students do not usually have full freedom of choice with specialist knowledge, and because students do not know what they want and are not clear of what they do not know. Therefore the notion of students as customers is

contrary to the traditional view that education is a developmental process instead of being a product or service to be sold to students (Sharrock, 2000). According to Morley (2003), seeing students as customers in contemporary higher education is symptomatic of a de-skilling process, because it would construct students as purchasers of an expensive product, and would make academics become accountable to students. As a consequence, it might cause a climate of anxiety among academics, and would make the higher education sector become a mass production industry.

Another argument against the notion of students as customers is that higher education differs from the service industry (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2002; Macfarlane, 2004a; Sharrock, 2000). One difference is that the professional service of higher education cannot be fully evaluated until after it has been experienced by students because they are not able to reflect fully upon the benefits of the knowledge and skills acquired and the attitudes they have developed until a number of years later when students have had sufficient opportunities to realize what they have learnt (Macfarlane, 2004a). Another difference is that the transformation process in higher education often involves cognitive transcendence, because the provider of education is 'doing something to the customer rather than just doing something for the customer' (Harvey, 1993, p. 24). The third difference between universities and other service industries is that universities regulate students and set standards for them. For example, going to university is different from going to McDonald's where there is no-one at the door to assess whether you are qualified to eat the food, and when you leave, no-one assesses whether you are qualified to leave (Sharrock, 2000).

The differences between universities and other service industries accounts for academics' resistance to the notion 'students as customers'. However, academics in general acknowledge the influence of students in the university. Lomas' (2007) empirical research examines how academics in three pre-1992 and three post-1992 universities in the UK perceive the student as a customer. Lomas suggests that the type of university is not as influential as academics' discipline and their position on

their attitudes to students as customers. For example, academics in business and management, dentistry and nursing, and other vocational subject areas, are more likely to be customer-oriented. Senior managers and governors are much more supportive of the view that students should be regarded as customers.

### **2.3.3 Decreased academic privileges**

Quality audit, as well as the widespread notion of students as customers has produced a fear that the power relation between academics and students would be changed, because the notion of students as customers would decrease academics' privileges. In the analysis of the impact of consumerism on learning and teaching in higher education, Naidoo & Jamieson (2003, 2005) argue that rather than empowering students, consumerism may entrench academic privilege in the following respects:

- Consumerism is likely to lead to the commodification of higher education and the pedagogic relationship will be transformed into a commercial transaction.
- The pressures of greater student numbers as well as the fear of student complaints and litigation has led to a shift from individually tailored feedback relying on professional judgement to minimal and standardized feedback that meets official criteria and protects academics against student complaints.
- In order to comply with the external monitoring procedures required by a consumerist framework, such as performance indicators and league tables, the university will manage data, or even in extreme cases falsify it. For example, the university might award more first class degrees and lower the failure rate (ibid).

Naidoo and Jamieson's argument helps to explain the potentially changed power relation between academics and students as a result of consumerism. However, their work is mainly theoretically based. Some of their arguments lack empirical evidence.

There is little other evidence that the power relation between academics and students has changed so far.

## **2.4 Impact on workload of academics**

This section analyzes how quality audit has affected the workload of academics. Concern around the workload of academics in the UK has generated a voluminous collection of both theoretical and empirical findings. Some of them are large-scale national surveys, such as Association of University Teachers survey in 1994 and 2003 (Court, 1996, Kinman & Jones, 2003, Kinman, *et al.*, 2006, and Tytherleigh, *et al.* 2005). These surveys all report that academics' workload is heavy and is becoming heavier, and that this has caused an overload in academics' teaching, research, and administration roles. Based on this research, this section first compares the working hours of academics in the UK from 1994 to 2004, then analyzes whether there is a connection between these long working hours and attitudes to quality audit.

### **2.4.1 Academics' long working hours**

There is evidence that academics in the UK normally work more than 40 hours a week, in spite of the differences of university and subject. Court (1996) reveals that in pre-1992 universities there is an average working week of almost 55 hours during term time. This is similar to the Association of University Teachers (AUT) (1994) finding that the average length of the working week in British universities was 53.5 hours (Court, 1996). These findings suggest that there was a long working hours' culture among academics in the period of Teaching Quality Assessment (1993-1995) which was operated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Has there been any change in this long working hour culture after this Quality Assessment process?

Kinman & Jones' (2003) survey in 1998 explores the working conditions of academics in the UK, and reveals that most respondents work long hours. For example, 66% of full-time academics work more than 45 hours in a typical week, and 23% regularly work in excess of 55 hours. This finding is identical to that of Court and the AUT. One way to explain this finding is that Kinman's survey was conducted in the period of QAA Subject Review (1995-2001), shortly after the Quality Assessment. The Subject Review was well known for its tight management of the UK university sector (see context chapter), so the academics' workload would remain heavy in this period. However, the QAA has been using Institutional Audit to evaluate the teaching of the HEIs since 2002. This Audit adopts a supposedly lighter touch quality mechanism and management. Will this lightened management reduce the work hours of the academics since 2002?

Tytherleigh, *et al.*'s (2005) survey was completed in 2002. It explores occupational stress among academic staff based on a survey of 3808 academics in fourteen UK HEIs. It reports that academics in general are stressed by work overload. 38% of respondents work between 41 and 50 hours in a typical week, and 40% work at least 51 hours. Similar findings appear in Kinman's survey in 2004, which covers 844 academics in 99 universities in the UK, and compares the stability over time of working hours, specific work stressors and levels of psychological distress experienced by academics in the period between 1998 and 2004. The survey reports that the average weekly working time for academics has reduced since 1998. For example, in the 1998 survey 73% respondents reported working 45 hours or more in a typical week, but in 2004 only 67% respondents working 45 hours or more. The proportion of the respondents regularly working over 55 hours has decreased from 23% in 1998 to 22% in 2004 (Kinman, *et al.*, 2006). The period 1998–2004, in which Kinman's two surveys were conducted, is also in the period of the QAA quality audit.

However, it is hard to tell the connection between this reduced workload and the

QAA audit, because there appears to be only minor changes of the working hours, and because some other factors could also contribute to the work overload of academics in the UK, such as the expansion of higher education, reduced funding to the university, and the growing demands of the Research Assessment Exercise. There is an indication that the work overload can be caused by short-term contracts and an increasing threat of redundancies within universities (Kinman & Jones, 2003; Kinman, *et al.*, 2006; Tytherleigh, *et al.*, 2005), the variety of students, increased need for support from the students, increased emphasis on coursework, and more use of student feedback (Fowler, 2005). Therefore, it is hard to tell whether the quality audit has increased or has reduced the academics' workload.

#### **2.4.2 Influence of academic work overload**

There is an argument that the work overload has caused some negative impact on the life of academics. For example, it has caused academics to have an imbalance in their teaching, research and administration roles. 53% of respondents in Kinman & Jones's (2003) survey said that their workloads were unmanageable and that 74% feel the pace of their work is too rushed. As a result, some respondents choose to constantly neglect an important job in favour of other tasks.

Another argument is that academics find it hard to maintain their work-life balance when facing heavy workload. The work of academics has encroached into other life domains of some academics. Many academics, surveyed by the AUT (2003), Kinman (2001), Kinman, *et al.* (2006), and Morley (2003), find their home has become an extension of the workplace. For example, 56% respondents find little spare time to pursue personal interests or hobbies, and 72% respondents believe that their families suffer as a direct result of the demands of their jobs (Kinman, *et al.*, 2006).

The imbalance between work and life has made some academics in the UK regret choosing an academic career. For example, Boyer, *et al.*'s (1994) international survey of the academic profession in 14 countries reports that 47 per cent UK respondents found their job a source of considerable personal strain, and 63 per cent said if they had it to do over again, they would not become academics. Similar findings appeared in Kinman *et al.*'s survey (2006) that 52% respondents experienced less job satisfaction, and had seriously considered leaving the university sector.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has surveyed research on the workings and perceived impact of a range of quality audit mechanisms on the work of academics. This chapter offers some illustrations of the debates about how quality audit has affected the work of academics in England, particularly in four main respects: undergraduate classroom teaching practice, the curriculum, power relations between academics and students, and academics' general workload. The mixed views on the impact of quality audit on teaching suggest that audit has become a source of controversy. Although there is a perception that quality audit has made the curriculum performance oriented, there is not much empirical evidence to support this argument. There is little evidence that the power relations between academics and students have been changed substantially, in spite of the indication that this might change in the future. There is evidence of long working hours among academics in England, but it is difficult to tell the extent to which quality audit has contributed to this culture.

After the literature review in Chapter 3-5, I am going to mainly use the theories of quality audit culture from Shore & Wright (2000) and Power (1994, 1997), as well as the debates on the impact of individual quality assurance mechanism on the work of academics to refer to the data led chapters (Chapter 7 – Chapter 10). There are three purposes in using the concept of quality audit, and the debates of quality audit

process, cultures, and its related quality assurance mechanisms. One is to illustrate how quality audit processes, audit culture, and its related quality assurance mechanisms have affected the work of respondents. Another is to testify whether my respondents held mixed views on the impact of quality audit on their teaching as Chapter 5 reveals. The third to find out the reasons behind my respondents' perception of quality audit processes, cultures, and its related quality assurance mechanisms.



## **Chapter 6: Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes, justifies and analyzes the design of my case study. I first illustrate the overall features of the interpretative paradigm, then identify the reasons why I prefer a single case study and explain the aims and purposes of my study. Next I translate these purposes into my three research questions and present the procedures of how I set up my data collection and how that related to my research questions. My data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and the ethical issues arising in my research are discussed. Finally, I outline the ways I chose to analyze my data and the reasons behind it. Together with the description and analysis, there is also a reflection on my research process, addressing the strength and limitation of my research. The validity and reliability of my research are also taken into consideration and are addressed in terms of the transcription, interpretation, and generalisability.

### **Section one: The interpretive research paradigm**

My research investigates how quality audit is perceived to have affected the work of academics in a pre-1992 research-intensive university in England. I considered that an interpretive research paradigm could build gradual pictures through interpretations that represent the complex reality of the particular social life (Holliday, 2002) in academe, and that I could gain the insights of academics on the process and mechanisms of quality audit through the use of interviews, backed up where appropriate by document analysis. I decided to adopt an interpretive research paradigm to explore how respondents had perceived quality audit and its impact on their work.

Meanwhile, I was aware of the limitation of the interpretative paradigm as a personal and subjective approach, especially when employing a case study as a method (Denscombe, 2003). Therefore, I explored respondents' perceptions of quality audit, which could be perceived as socially constructed, by mutual negotiation and through an analysis of the specific situation being investigated. The impact of quality audit on the work of academics might vary according to different universities and different academics and reality is not 'out there', rather quality audit is a social construct as well as a process which people understand in different ways (Morrison, 2002, p.18). This suggests that there is no objective reality of the impact of quality audit. My way of finding out the impact of quality audit on the work of academics is to capture my interviewees' perceptions through their description and interpretation of their experiences with quality audit, compare the mechanisms mentioned with official documents, and then analyse and further interpret the data, remaining sensitive to the context, and finally provide an experiential account for readers to reflect on.

## **Section two: My case study research**

In the interpretive paradigm, I strived to understand how respondents perceived the impact of quality audit through a case study approach. According to Yin (2003, p.23), a case study is: 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used'. Yin's definition of a case study contains the following important points. First, there is an emphasis on the empirical, in the sense of relying on the collection of evidence about what is going on. Second, it focuses on a phenomenon in context, especially in situations where the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clear. Third, it advocates use of multiple methods of evidence or data collection, because they can provide multiple sources of evidence that can be used to explain the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, Yin's definition covers both the scope

of a case study, in other words, the contextual conditions which are pertinent to the study, and research strategies, such as data collection and data analysis methods. In this case, a case study is seen as a comprehensive research strategy with its focus on a case which is an entity with a unique life.

Similarly, my research focuses on a research – intensive pre - 1992 university in the UK, which can be seen as a case. I attempt to preserve the wholeness, unity and integrity of my case through conducting 64 interviews and a large amount of document analysis to explore in depth how the academics in this university perceive the impact of quality audit on their work. The interviews and documentary analysis can be seen as my multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods. My research thus possesses the features of a case study: a case, research strategies, and an aim for in depth study.

## **2.1 Types of case study**

The literature on the use of case studies suggests that there are different types. The section below gives examples on these different types and reveals how my case study might be classified. Firstly, according to Yin (1994), a case study can be seen as exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. An exploratory case study aims at defining the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent study. In other words, it functions to resolve uncertainty, for example through a pilot study. A descriptive case study provides a description of a phenomenon within its context. The narrative accounts can be achieved through the perceptions of participants and through observation. An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships and explains which causes produce which effects.

Secondly, a case study can be classified as a single case study where the focus is within the case, and or multiple case studies, where the focus is both within and

across cases (Yin, 2003). There are two versions of the single case study, classified on the basis of the level of the unit of analysis: holistic case studies and embedded case studies. Holistic case studies examine the global nature of an organization or programme. An embedded case study concerns multiple units of analysis within a case (Yin, 1994). Both single and multiple case studies can be 'based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence' and they need not necessarily include observations as a source of evidence (Yin, 2003, p.15).

Thirdly, Stake (1995, 2005) identifies three categories of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic case study is undertaken primarily because the case itself is of interest. The case is pre-selected. It does not aim to understand an abstract construct or generic phenomenon or build theories, but the researcher does not avoid generalisation. Intrinsic case studies are designed to understand the case in its complexity and entirety, as well as in its context. In instrumental case studies, a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. This case may be seen as typical of other cases or not and it plays a supportive role, but it is still looked at in depth, because this helps the researcher to pursue an external interest. A collective case study is an instrumental one extended to several cases. Researchers study these similar or dissimilar cases to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition.

Based on the above classifications, my study is therefore:

- A single case study (Yin, 2003), involving only one research-intensive pre-1992 university in the UK.
- Descriptive (Yin, 1994) in that it provides narrative accounts of the impact of quality audit on the work of academics through the perception of academics and through documentary analysis.
- Explanatory (Yin, 1994) in that my study aims to test current theories on quality

audit in higher education in order to determine whether two well-formulated theories of quality audit in higher education by Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) are supported or whether some alternative sets of explanation might be more relevant. Hence, my study is explanatory in that it can raise issues which might contribute to theory – building and theory development of quality audit in UK higher education institutions.

- Instrumental (Stake, 1995, 2005) in that my research intends to provide insight into the issue of quality audit in higher education by exploring the perceptions of academics through interviews. My case university is a research – intensive as well as an excellent teaching pre-1992 university in the UK based on its ranking in the top 50 of the 2004 Sunday Times University League table. Its average result for the QAA Subject Review from 1997 to 2001 (on a subject by subject basis), is 22 marks out of a possible 24. The first round of QAA Institutional Audit in 2004 gave a judgment of broad confidence in the soundness of the university's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. Therefore, this case study university can provide a supportive role in understanding other pre-1992 universities. I interviewed 64 academics from 7 different disciplines to enable me to achieve an in-depth study to find out how individual academics perceived quality audit. I aim to describe the themes arising from my case study in sufficient descriptive depth with interpretation, so that readers can experience these happenings vicariously and draw their own conclusions.

I believe that my case study has the following advantages. First of all, it offers an opportunity to research quality audit in higher education. Second, it provides a rich, contextualized account of how academics perceived quality audit and its impact on their work. Third, it helps to understand the impact of quality audit on the work of academics in depth and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. Therefore my case study is an in depth study for full understanding of the

perceived impact of quality audit on the work of academics in a university in England.

## **2.2 My case study university**

As explained in the previous section my research focuses on a research – intensive pre-1992 university in England. There are three main reasons why I chose this particular university as my case. First, I am interested in studying the impacts of quality audit on undergraduate teaching. This university is well known for its teaching excellence in undergraduate teaching, although it is primarily research-led. Second, this university ranked in the top 50 in the 2004 Sunday Times University League table, which can be seen as a product of quality audit and also an effective way to attract students, especially those from overseas. 2004 is relevant as that is the year in which the case was selected. Third, the factor of ‘expense, time and accessibility’ (Cohen, et, 2000, p. 92) plays an important role in my choice of the case university. It was conveniently located and I was permitted full access to it as a researcher.

It is important to make it clear that I do not intend to use my case study university to generalize about the wider population of higher education institutions in the UK. Qualitative researchers often seek to generalize (Kvale, 1996), but such a practice should not necessarily be the objective of all research projects, whether case studies or not (Denzin, 2006). However, considering that there is potential generalizability of knowledge built from case study (Punch, 2005), and that my case study aims to develop theories of quality audit in higher education, I argue that my findings should allow the development of generalisable theoretical propositions. My way of producing generalizable outcomes is by developing the concept of quality audit based on my case study. The rationale for my theoretical generalization is that I chose my case for its power to explain rather than for its typicality because ‘the

features present in a case study will be related in a wide population not because the case is representative but because our analysis is unassailable' (Mitchell, 1983, p.109).

When conducting my research, I bear in mind that every institution is unique and has its own traditions and cultures. The way academics in a university perceive quality audit and the way they deal with quality audit might be different from the academics in other universities because each phenomenon has its own intrinsic structure and logic (Kvale, 1996). My research thus may not be able to produce laws of human behaviour that could be generalized universally, but it aims first for in depth understanding of my case university, and to produce concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge because the sample of 64 interviews of academics in seven disciplines in one university is big enough to enable me to explore in depth the perceived impacts of quality audit on the work of academics. Then I will develop propositions of quality audit from my case for further study. Some of the propositions might be used to help understand other institutions in the context of quality audit. In this sense, my research can be seen as a descriptive, interpretative and analytical study based upon changes of and quality audit reforms in UK higher education.

### **2.3 My research questions**

After the above description of the features of my single case study, this section is going to discuss my three main research questions around which my case study is developed:

***Research Question One:*** What perceived impact have the external quality assurance mechanisms, such as the QAA Institutional Audit, the external examining system, the control of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies over some teaching programmes and the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS), had on the work of

academics?

***Research Question Two:*** What perceived impact have the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution, namely, peer observation, student course evaluation, annual programme review and the approval system for new and revised programmes and units, had on the work of academics?

***Research Question Three:*** Do academics perceive themselves to be professionals? Is there a perceived tension between quality audit processes and the academic culture and the perception that academic work as a profession?

I adopted interviews and relevant documentary analysis to address these research questions. Take the first two questions for example. I first looked at the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms within my case university, current changes of these mechanisms and causes of these changes. Secondly, I tested academics' knowledge of both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms by asking them questions like: 'have you ever heard of ....?' and 'can you tell me something of ....' Thirdly, I explored academics' perception of the implementation of these mechanisms within their department and institution, such as whether the mechanism is compulsory or voluntary and whether the department/institution has adopted a serious attitude to the implications of quality mechanisms. Fourthly, I showed a particular interest in academics' attitudes towards these mechanisms and asked them what they liked or disliked about each mechanism. Fifthly, I asked academics how these mechanisms had affected their undergraduate classroom teaching practice, their overall workload, and their relationship with students and the design/development of the curriculum. Taking the external examining system for example, I first asked academics' view of the pros and cons of the external examining system and then asked academics whether they thought it could affect their undergraduate classroom teaching practice or not, and if so, how this occurs. Next I questioned whether academics felt their workload and their relationship with students had been affected by the external examining system or not. Finally, I asked them what the impact of



this system was on the curriculum. In order to encourage academics to speak more about the external examining system, I asked them to reflect on their experience of being external examiners themselves and how they had made use of their experiences and whether these experiences had been useful to them.

### **Section three: Data collection for the case study**

In order to refine my data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed, I conducted my pilot case study in November 2005. It helped me to develop my interview questions and provided some conceptual clarification for my research design. In my pilot study, I interviewed four academics in my case university institution, three lecturers and one professor from four departments (not the one used in the main study) and one senior manager from the QAA. The length of my interviews ranged from thirty minutes to one hour and fifty minutes.

#### **3.1 My pilot case study**

Before my pilot study interviews, I was worried that English as my second language would prevent academics from understanding my questions well, and that my international student status would create a power relation imbalance between my respondents and me. However, to my great surprise, this problem was not apparent in my interviews. My respondents were very friendly and helpful. One reason might be that some respondents were recommended by my supervisor. Some respondents tried to speak as clearly as they could, and paused and explained what they said when they noticed that I looked puzzled. Some respondents even kindly gave me suggestions on my research, such as how to avoid big questions, how to give eye contact in the interviews and whom else might be interviewed. One of them recommended me a senior QAA manager, her previous student, with whom I had a one hour fifty minutes

interview later on.

This pilot study thus formed the exploratory phase, resolving my uncertainty concerning about how quality audit had affected the work of academics and increased my confidence in the main phase of my case study research. According to my respondents' suggestion and my reflection on pilot interviews, I did a draft of my interview questions for my case study.

### **3.2 Interviews as my case study method**

In my empirical case study data collection, I used two main methods: interviews and documentary analysis. There are two reasons for my adopting interviews as my main research method. One is that knowledge is situated and contextual, so the interview can elucidate relevant contexts to highlight the situated knowledge during the process of interviewing the research participant (Mason, 2002). The other reason is because I assume that understanding, views and perceptions of academics are meaningful and important properties to study the phenomenon of quality audit in UK higher education institutions. Although the subjective perception of academics is hard to observe, it could be achieved through interviews because the interview process is a form of dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee with the aim of constructing the meaning inherent in the experiential accounts of the research subjects (Kvale, 1996).

My case study thus used interviews to provide an in-depth insight into quality audit in higher education in England to get valuable information and ideas from respondents. The respondents engaged in discussions about quality audit and expressed their experience, feeling and attitudes with regard to quality audit, so interviews became the medium through which knowledge was constructed from the interviewee's personal experiences. This confirms the view of Kvale (1996, p. 105)

that interviews are 'particularly suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world'.

During the interview process, I was aware that there were limitations to using interviews in data collection, such as, the bias of interviewer, and the snap shot nature of the views they revealed. Although I was responsive to the situation during the interview and attempted to produce a valid and reliable transcript and findings, there is a danger that I might have unintentionally made mistakes by allowing my bias to affect the study. Bias in qualitative research is inevitable due to the fact that the researcher is the primary instrument of research and the data he or she gathers will be biased regardless of the research method employed (Janesick, 2000). Another reason for this potential bias is because a semi-structured interview is a highly subjective technique, the interviewer's manner might have an effect on the respondents (Bell, 1993). One example is that the response of an interviewee might be based on the emotional impact or the perceived purpose of an interviewer (Keats, 2000). In order to reduce and minimize this potential bias, I was careful not to let my emotions show when asking about respondents' perception towards quality audit, as well as using semi-structured interviews which allowed me as a researcher to adapt the main questions to suit the interviewees complementary roles in order to explore his or her different perspectives in depth (Denscombe, 2003). I asked a lot of open questions instead of closed ones. This gave my respondents more space to elaborate their views, meanwhile encouraging them to speak about their opinions in depth telling me what they thought and what they knew. As a result, I could consider issues in terms of what they truly thought (Walker, 1989) to avoid a subjective account initiated by me. The other limitation of my use of interviews was that it only allowed for a snap shot of views (Kvale, 1996) because what respondents talked about was their views of quality audit at that specific time when interviewed. If some of them had changed workload or changed position now, they might have views of audit different from what they had before. In order to reduce this potential superficiality of

my interview data, I made it clear in my thesis that the perception of my respondents was explored in the time shortly after they experienced QAA Institutional Audit.

### **3.2.1 Semi-structured and one-to-one interviews**

In general my interviews were carried out in two different phases. The first phase was from January 2006 to April 2006, including 64 semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The interview questions were developed from my first two research questions. I explored academics' view of, attitudes to, and value of quality assurance mechanisms, which was used to reflect on the perceived impact of quality audit on their work. In the 64 interviews, I asked open-ended questions, listened to and recorded the answers, and then followed up with additional relevant questions.

One advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that it enables the interviewee to elaborate their points of interest because it is a flexible approach and helps them speak more widely and develop their own thoughts to reach more depth of analysis (Denscombe, 2003). As a result of using semi-structured interviews I understood better my interviewee's perspective of quality audit. My interviews were not only semi-structured but one-to-one for three main reasons. The first reason is because my research topic is a sensitive one. Some of my interviewees did not want their departments and their colleagues to know that they were interviewed. I am obliged to keep the identity of the interviewees anonymous, so it was inappropriate for me to arrange group interviews. The second reason is because a group interview can omit certain views, especially those who are quiet. Some members of the group will dominate the talk, while others might lose the chance to let their views known....

*The opinions that are expressed are ones that are perceived to be 'acceptable' within the group. Where group members regard their opinions as contrary to prevailing opinion within the group, they might be inclined to keep quiet, or moderate their views somewhat (Denscombe, 2003, p. 168).*

The third reason is as a student, I find it easier to arrange one-to-one interview with academics because this enables me to 'locate specific ideas with specific people' (Denscombe, 2003, p.167). I also found it relatively easy for me to maintain control of the one – to – one interview process because I only had one person's views to grasp and interrogate and one person to guide through the interview. Therefore, I had a clear idea of what I wanted to find out. I asked the right questions to get the information I needed, and I gave appropriate verbal and nonverbal feedback whenever needed. For example, I listened carefully to make sure that the responses received provided me with answers to the questions asked. If the responses were not relevant to my question, I would remind the interviewee, after he or she finished talking of my interest by saying: 'that is really interesting, but can you tell me something about....?' In this situation, if my interviewee still refused to give me a direct answer, I would not ask him/her again, because I did not want to discomfort or offend them. Instead, I would wait until he or she finished talking and then moved on to my next question.

### **3.2.2 Interviews via emails**

The second phase of my interviews took place in October 2006, after transcription of my first phase 64 interviews. It took the form of email interviewing, and was carried out around research question three (See Section 2.3 this chapter). I identified some frequently used words and phrases by academics from the transcription, such as, bureaucracy and professionalism, and found these two were being counterposed, so I developed three questions around them. These questions enabled me to reveal and explain in depth academics' perception of quality audit. (See appendix 7)

I emailed these questions after securing permission from my respondents who were interviewed in the first phase interviews. 30 out of 64 responded. Some of them

responded more than once to explain their opinions. There are two main reasons I used email interviewing. One reason was that I had developed rapport with my respondents in the first phase interview. They knew my purposes and expectations, and they all had easy access to the internet. The other reason was my consideration of time saving, convenience and feasibility. It was hard for me to arrange a second face-to-face interview with my respondents because they were busy, especially at the end of the academic term, so I used email interviewing which was quick, efficient, time-saving, and low cost. (Meho, 2006; Wellington, 2000) I interviewed more than one respondent at a time. Many respondents replied on the same day I emailed them, so I could easily and quickly probe their views and perspectives through their response.

Meanwhile I was aware that there was a weakness in email interviewing. For example, I could not pick up my respondents' visual cues (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). These included facial expressions such as smiles and frowns, and other aural and visual cues such as tones of voice, and pauses in speech, which would have been valuable for adding depth to my understanding. I sought to minimize this weakness by asking for clarification if there was any question over the meaning of a response that might have been lost because of the lack of nonverbal cues. When some reply was abrupt and short, I went back to ask again in other ways to clarify what my respondents implied. In my experience, I found email interviewing had some other advantages. One was that it helped to avoid embarrassment on some sensitive topics and allowed the interviewees time for reflection on and consideration of the problem (Wellington, 2000). The second advantage was that I had time between receiving answers and sending the next set of questions to reflect on how best to follow up on the information received. This enabled me to check hunches within the same interviews as well as across interviews (Hamilton, & Bowers, 2006), then design follow up questions. The third advantage of using email interviewing was that there was no need for any transcription to occur in my email interviewing, which saved my

time in data collection.

### **3.3 Documentation**

Interviews did not comprise the only form of my data gathering. Documents relevant to my research topic were used as a second important source of my case study. A document is 'an artifact which has as its central feature an inscribed text' (Scott, 1990, p. 5). In other words, the text is the central and most obvious feature of a document because the script is the written expression of a spoken language and therefore contains a text. Documents are important to my research because they provide public information and they helped me to understand and construct the social context of the case study university. They formed an important way to represent and to perpetuate the case study university from which they originate and give meaning to the university (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Mason, 2002). The documents I used in my research were of various kinds:

- library – based, aimed at producing a critical synopsis of quality audit in higher education in UK;
- internet-based, consisting of open-published official documents, derived from the website of QAA, HEFCE, and Teaching Quality Information (TQI), such as university Institutional Audit reports, Subject Benchmarking Statements (SBSs) and results from the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS). I asked my interviewees how much they know about SBSs and what they thought of the impact of the NSS on their teaching practice and the development of their curriculums. I compared the content of Institutional Audit reports with the effects of Institutional Audit from the perception of my interviewees.
- institution-based, that is documents obtained from my case university. This covers Annual Programme Review Report (APRR), department self-evaluation reports and minutes from departmental meetings (2005-2006) on undergraduate teaching, quality and quality assurance. I explored how academics perceived the

impacts of the internal quality assurance mechanisms on their work and whether these mechanisms have achieved their objective or not. Self-evaluation reports and departmental meetings were used to find out the attitude to and strategies for quality audit at the department level.

The first step in my documentary analysis was to test whether the documents had the three following characteristics or not: *authenticity* - whether it is actually what it purports to be; *credibility* – the extent to which the evidence is undistorted and free from error; and *representativeness* - whether it is representative of the totality of similar documents (Scott, 1990). In order to test the soundness of a document, I ensured that it was a copy of the original. In appraisal of credibility, I undertook a critical scrutiny of why the author chose to write the document and whether the author believed what she or he actually recorded. When reading the documents, I ensured that my documents represented the totality of similar documents of quality audit.

After testing the quality of my documents, I analyzed the meaning and significance of what my documents contain at two levels: literally and interpretatively. I not only described the content of the document(s) but also engaged in an analysis of meanings, themes, ideas, and use of language. In order to produce interpretations of a text, I attempted to understand the wider public context in which a text was circulated because the same text might have different meaning in different contexts. According to McKee (2001), context is other texts that surround a text which provide useful information for making sense of it, and which teach people how to interpret these texts.

The main text analysis method I adopted was content analysis which originates in mass communication approaches to the media. It uses quantitative techniques to



assess the significance of particular items within a text, for example, the frequency of times a particular idea appeared in the document is taken as measures of the importance of the idea to the author (McKee, 2001). Many words of the text are classified into content categories. Each category may consist of one, several, or many words (Weber, 1990).

As Weber (1990) suggests there might be problems of reliability and validity in the text classification because they can be caused by ambiguity of the word meanings and category definitions. In my case study, I was careful with the meaning of words and category definitions. In order to find out the frequency of key concepts, ideas, words, and respondents' perceptions of quality audit, I created and tested my coding schemes. After reading the document, the first step I took was to find out themes related to quality audit and defined them as my recording units of the text. Sometimes long, complex sentences were broken down into shorter thematic units. This form of coding helped me to develop detailed comparisons of the effect of quality audit on the work of academics. After creating my coding schemes, I defined the category which included my recording units. My categories were mutually exclusive because I did not want the same recording units belonging to different categories. During the coding, I examined the highest - frequency words that had been classified into categories because these words reflected the greatest concern of the document (Weber, 1990). In order to test the clarity of my category definitions, I first coded a small sample of the text, and then coded the whole text to reveal its meaning. During the analysis, I related text to the intentions of the author whilst bearing in mind that the objective meaning of a document might go beyond these intentions. I sought to be systematic in my data analysis, and related the documentary data to my research questions, as well as compared the official views of quality audit from the public documents with that from my respondents because the information from these documents might be different from the perception of my respondents.

In general, the documents served as an important supplementary form of my data, corroborating and augmenting evidence from different sources (Yin, 2003), to illustrate how the quality audit had affected the work of respondents in my case study university. They provide

*'a valuable source of data for the analysis of official definitions of what is defined as problematic, what is viewed as answers, and what is regarded as proper solution' (Jupp, 1996, p. 302).*

### **3.4 Ethical concerns in the case study**

Before and during the process of conducting my case study, I have needed to bear in mind that I am obliged to act in accordance with the principles of ethical research practice in the educational research field. Ethics is defined as:

*a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others. Being ethical limits the choices we can make in the pursuit of truth. Ethics say that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better, even if, in the extreme case, the respect of human nature leaves one ignorant of human nature' (Caven, 1977, p. 810, from Cohen, et, 2000).*

The question of ethics in research is a highly complex subject because each stage in the research sequence may be a potential source of ethical problems (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Cohen, et al, 2000). The ethical problems may arise from the nature of the research project itself, the context for the research, the procedures adopted, methods of data collection, the nature of the participants, the types of data collected and what is to be done with the data.

There is evidence that the complexity of ethics stems from some people's moral attitudes as well as regulatory tensions. One is the tension between two sets of related values held by society: 'a belief in the free scientific inquiry in pursuit of truth and knowledge, and a belief in the dignity of individuals and their right to those

considerations that follow from it' (Cohen, et, 2000, p.58). This tension can put the researcher in moral predicaments because which proposition he favors, or how to strike a balance between the two will depend on the background, experience, and personal values of the individual researcher (Cohen & Manion, 1994). However, there is an emphasis that the welfare of subjects should be kept in mind, even if it involves compromising the impact of the research (Cohen, et, 2000).

### **3.4.1 Informed consent**

The literature reveals that there are some fundamental concepts contributing to the principles of ethical procedures to protect the welfare of human subjects: informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. According to Ryen (2004), informed consent means 'research subjects have the right to know that they are being researched, the right to be informed about the nature of the research and the right to withdraw at any time' (p. 231). The need for informed consent normally appears at the initial stage of the research project – that of access to the institution or organization where the research is to be conducted, and acceptance by the participants (Cohen, et, 2000). In my case study, there were two stages of getting informed consent.

In the first stage, I identified the 'gate keeper'. This phrase refers to the official and significant figures whose permission must be sought to do my research in the case university. They were persons who were responsible for undergraduate teaching in the faculty. I contacted them and got their permission to do research in their faculties. At a later point, I chose two departments/schools from each faculty which I researched. Most of these departments/schools got top marks in Subject Review and the latest Departmental Review in their faculty. The rest of them had experienced a recent Institutional Audit Trail. Next, I sent letters to Heads of School/ Department to introduce the overall purposes of my research and the main features of my design. I expressed my interest in doing interviews in their departments and asked for their

consent. I promised confidentiality and anonymization of all the data to be collected. Only one head of departments/schools declined my request, for the reason that he had to protect his staff's time for research and teaching. Another department did not respond to my application until I finished all my data collection, so I had to decline its offer. In the end, I got access to seven departments/schools in my first data collection phase.

The second stage of obtaining informed consent was to contact academics in the seven departments/schools researched. I first read through these departments/schools websites for information about academics and selected individuals according to three criteria: undergraduate teaching, rank of position, and gender. In other words, I only chose academics who undertook undergraduate teaching. I chose academics according to their rank of position. Here, I wanted to ensure that I had a good balance of professors, lecturers and teaching fellows, as well as academic managers, such as the Head of School/ Department, and the programme director for undergraduate teaching. A similar profile was chosen from each department/school researched. Meanwhile I took the gender difference into consideration because Morley (2003) and others have noted that women academics may respond differently to audit processes. Therefore I aimed to get an equal number of female and male respondents in each department/school. However it turned out to be not feasible due to subject differences. Two of the departments/schools researched had very few female academics, so, instead, I had to ensure that my interviewees were representative of the gender balance within the department when choosing my respondents. In this way, I got access to 22 female and 42 male interviewees in the case study university.

### **3.4.2 Protection of respondents**

During data collection, I was fully aware of the importance of protecting my respondents. One way I did this was to make their participation in my research

voluntary. I emailed chosen academics individually to show my interest in interviewing them, together with an introductory letter about my research explaining to them what my research was about, why it was being undertaken, and how the data was going to be used. In order to present myself as trustworthy and accommodating, I promised to protect the rights, interests, privacy and sensitivities of these respondents, informing them of their right to withdraw or refuse to participate whenever they wanted. On the day of interviews, I produced a copy of my research statement and asked respondents to sign it. During the interviews, I asked for respondents' permission to tape our conversations.

Except for asking respondents' to take part in my research voluntarily, confidentiality was another way I used to protect my respondents' rights. The essence of confidentiality is the extent to which investigators keep faith with those who have helped them (Cohen, et al, 2000). This means that as a researcher I should know who has provided the information, and that I am able to identify participants from the information given, but not make the connection known publicly. What I did was to keep all personal data of my respondents concealed and made it public only behind a shield of anonymity (Christians, 2005). The essence of anonymity, according to Cohen, et al (2000, p. 61), 'is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity.' My main way to ensure anonymity was not using the names of my respondents or any other personal means of identification.

### **3.5 Reflections on my interviews**

During the interviews, I found that while being ethically considerate of my respondents was important, so was achieving their goodwill and co-operation. My field research extended over ten months. Some academics were interviewed twice. If there had been no support from my respondents, my interviews could not have carried on smoothly.

### **3.5.1 Building trust and rapport**

During my interviews and document collection, I presented myself as competent and honest. I was confident talking about quality audit and its related quality assurance mechanisms. The respondents could tell from my speech that I knew about the politics and process of quality audit. When they mentioned something new about the audit, I reminded them in a polite way that it would be nice if they spoke a little more about that. In this way, I built up trust between me and most of my respondents.

However, only building up trust is not enough in the process of interviews, I found establishing rapport from the respondents as vitally important. In order to achieve this purpose, at the beginning of each interview, I asked simple open-ended interview questions about the interviewee's jobs and responsibilities within their department or institution, which was used to provide contexts for later discussion of quality audit. The questions asked were sequentially organized and started with the form of "what", "how", and "why" questions. They were first concerned with internal quality assurance mechanisms within their institution and then concerned with the external quality assurance mechanisms imposed on the institutional level. The aim of the questioning was to obtain respondents' descriptions of their experiences, as well as to elicit their explanations of their perception of quality audit. I was active and reflective during the entire interview process and raised some new questions arising from the respondents' description and account of quality audit, such as their general perception of quality audit, which quality assurance mechanism they liked or disliked, and what they thought of the current quality of undergraduate teaching in higher education. In this way, the majority of my interviews went well and I managed to establish good rapport between myself and my respondents.

### **3.5.2 Power relations in the interviews**

During the interview, I explored how my international student status had affected my interviews in order to find out whether it had produced any imbalance of power relations between my respondents and me. The followings are reflections from my interviews:

- On most occasions, my international student status affected my interviews in a positive way. In my pilot study, some of my respondents tried to speak as clearly as they could because they knew that English was not my first language. Similarly, in my empirical research, a lot of my respondents were sympathetic, expressing that it would be very hard for an international student to do research in England. Some of them told me that I was welcome to come back to them again whenever I needed help in my research.
- As to the assumed power relations between respondents and me, it was difficult to detect it in my pilot interviews, but I did feel it in a couple of interviews in my empirical data collection. Three respondents were suspicious of the purpose of my research and joked that I was a spy for the QAA. I had to reassure them that the interviews were only for my PhD thesis. Two respondents felt relieved at my explanation and cooperated very well in the interviews, but one respondent was still reluctant to talk much. This suggests that although I am a student, my interviewer status had made some respondents feel threatened by the nature of my project.

I felt that four academics imposed their power over me because of my student status. For example, one female academic agreed to be interviewed, but she arranged our two meetings only at the time she was supposed to see her students in her open office hour. In the first meeting, my interview only lasted about fifteen minutes when she stopped me by saying that a student was waiting for her outside her office. I reminded her that she could withdraw our interview if she was very busy, but she suggested another time for our second meeting. It was

again the time she was seeing her students. I arrived on time, but had to wait outside her office for about half an hour until she finished her meeting with her students. At the beginning of our second meeting, she told me that she would stop me whenever there was a student looking for help. As a result she stopped our meeting after ten minutes. Interviews with her were so tense that I could not help feeling nervous, almost like I was back in school facing a strict teacher.

#### **Section four: Theoretical samplings**

During my interviews, I not only considered the ethical issues and the relationship between me and my respondents, but also the importance of sampling within my case study as a means of collecting satisfactory data. I adopted theoretical sampling in choosing my interviewees. Theoretical sampling is

*a process of data collection for generating theory, whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by theoretical sampling according to the emerging theory. (Glaser, 1992, p. 101, in Punch, 2005)*

It is obvious that theoretical sampling puts emphasis on ‘sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176). The relevance refers to concepts that are

*deemed to be significant because they are repeatedly representative or notably absent when comparing incident after incident, and are of sufficient importance to be given the status of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176).*

There were two considerations for my adopting theoretical sampling. One was that it was not feasible for me to interview every academic in the department/school I was interested in, and that I wanted to avoid falling into a representational logic trap. Specifically, I did not want to assume that because I selected one category of a particular type, this could somehow represent all categories of this type. The categories of academic respondents and manager-academic respondents I chose were



intended to allow me to generate data to explore similarities and differences in their perception of the impact of quality audit on their work, in order to test and to develop theories of quality audit in the context of England, rather than to make statistical comparisons between academics and manager-academics in England, and to infer causality on that basis. Another consideration for my adopting theoretical sampling was that my interviewee samples should be related to some theoretical propositions. The main criteria for my choosing academic interviewees were their status, position, rank, gender, years of working, and types of contract because Newton (2002) reveals that different academics hold different views on quality audit.

My theoretical sampling went well. A lot of academics showed great interest in my research and their response rate was very high. In the end, I managed to get 64 respondents in 7 different disciplines in 5 faculties. These 64 respondents included 16 manager-academic respondents, 48 academic respondents. These respondents include those in early/late career, and those with permanent/temporary contracts. The manager-academic respondents were those responsible for quality assurance in the department/school, such as programme directors and directors of undergraduate studies within the school/department, heads of school/department, people responsible for faculty undergraduate studies, and faculty staff in charge of quality assurance or directing staff development. The academic respondents included professors, readers, senior lecturers, lecturers, and teaching assistants (Table 1).

**Table 1: Number of academic interviewees in the departments (N=48) (Names of departments are anonymized)**

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Professor		1	2			1	1
Lecturer	2	3	3	3	1	3	7
Teaching fellow	2		2		1		2
QA staff	2	1	2		5	2	2

Of the 64 respondents, 22 were female and 42 were male (Table 2).

**Table 2: Gender/interviewee (T&L= teaching and learning committee) (F=22; M=42)**

	T&L	Faculty T& L	Dean	HoD	QA staff	Prof	Lecturer	Teaching fellow
Female	1	2	1	1	3	1	9	4
Male		2	4	6	11	4	13	2

The figures shows that the proportion of women in the academic interviewed as a whole in the case study university reached 34.37 per cent. This proportion is similar to that of the proportion of women academics in the university as a whole. The amount of imbalance between female staff and male staff is explained by the fact that there are fewer female academics than male ones in science and engineering subjects than in arts and social sciences. This is partly because a natural scientist may spend much of their research and teaching time in a laboratory, while a humanities scholar will make much more use of libraries and archives because 'the latter is a more flexible environment than the former for anyone juggling complex home responsibilities with a job' (Deem, 2003, p. 244). The figure 34.37 per cent is similar to the finding of HESA (2008) that the proportion of full time women in the academic profession as a whole in the UK was 36.1 per cent in their 2004/05 survey.

### **Section five: Transcription**

After the 64 interviews were completed I began data transcription. All my 64 transcripts were based mainly on audio data, so I tagged my voice record with details of when, where the interview took place and which interviewee was recorded. Flick (1998) provides a good example of a document sheet on information about the

interview and the interviewee (appendix 9), which I have adopted. Where identification was possible in the transcripts, the name of the interviewee was replaced by reference letters, and the data was anonymised, both to comply with data protection regulations and to protect participants' identity on ethical grounds. After reference coding, I duplicated my data and used the back-up copies for analysis and stored the original one.

The data from all my interviews were transcribed in full and verbatim because I wanted to ensure that these transcripts are faithful reproductions of the oral record. The verbatim accounts when transcribed tend to look remarkably disjointed, inarticulate, and even incoherent when committed to the printed page (Patton 1990). Therefore it is important that in the transcripts all pauses, broken sentences, interruptions, and other aspects of the messiness of casual conversation are faithfully reproduced (Poland, 2001).

### **5.1 Quality of my transcripts**

I personally found transcription an extremely time-consuming process. For half an hour on tape, it normally took me three to six hours to transcribe. When doing the transcription, I bore in mind that there would be some potential challenges to transcription quality. First, the transcribers' problems with sentence structure, the use of quotation marks, omissions, and mistaking words or phrases for others. Second, a failure of transcripts is that they do not tend to indicate when people are paraphrasing or mimicking others, or when respondents quote things others told them. Third, omissions can occur when transcribers go forward and backward in the tape when they listen to a passage more than once, with the danger that they do not pick up exactly where they left off and pieces are lost. Fourth, transcribers mistake words for other similar words that may or may not make sense in the context of what is being said (Poland, 2001).

I minimized the above challenges by improving accuracy of my transcription. I transcribed everything I could hear on the tapes, even aspects of emotional context are expressed with an oral component, such as pauses, sighs, laughter, coughing and phone ringing and I presented them in the way as Poland (2001, p.641) suggested:

- Pauses: short pauses (...); two - to three – second breaks (pause); four or more seconds (long pause)
- Laughing, coughing, etc: indicate in parentheses (cough), (sigh). Using (laughing) to denote one person, (laughter) to denote several laughing
- Interruptions: indicate when someone’s speech is broken off midsentence by including a hyphen (-) at the point where the interruption occurs (e.g. “what do you –“)
- Use x’s to denote passages that cannot be deciphered at all (number of x’s should denote approximate number of words that cannot be deciphered).
- Emphasis: use caps to denote strong emphasis; for example, “He did WHAT?”

Except for transcribing everything I could hear on the tapes, I used my interview notes to achieve accuracy of my transcripts because the notes revealed the interview contexts, which helped me to conduct in-depth analysis of how my respondents perceived the impact of quality audit on their work. Moreover in order to use the right punctuations, before I decided where to begin and end sentences, I listened to the tape a couple of times carefully, sometimes several times, to make sure I understood what the interviewee meant, then I inserted the punctuations corresponding to an oral statement, though it is still a guess as the spoken word does not involve punctuation.

## **5.2 Tension between accuracy and readability**

In the whole process of my transcription, I was fully aware of the tension between

accuracy and readability, and initially transcribed the interviews verbatim, so when the interviews were conversational rather than following a structured question and answer approach, my data had the features of conversations, i.e. repetitions, hesitations, pauses, 'um' and 'err'. However, due to the fact that all my respondents are academics, it was possible to derive verbatim quotes from them, on most occasions, which does not make difficult reading.

I encountered some other difficulties in my transcription. For example, I found two interviews difficult to transcribe and they took me much a longer time than expected. Furthermore, in these two interviews there was excessive background noise, such as the traffic sound on the street, the persistent ringing of a telephone in my interviewee's office and, several times, colleagues knocking at the door. What I did was to describe and present this contextual interference in my transcription. In one interview, because of weak batteries in my voice recorder, I lost one third of the conversation, so I had to rely on my field notes to finish my transcription.

### **Section six: Data analysis**

After the interview transcription, it was time for my data analysis. According to Yin (2003), case study data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, and testing evidence to address the initial propositions of a study. This means that data analysis should focus on defining priorities for what to analyze and why. In my data analysis, I adopted the strategy of theoretical propositions (Yin, 2003), which means that data analysis will be shaped by the theoretical framework within which my study is conducted (Patton, 1990). The first step I undertook was to read my data on three levels: *literally*, *interpretively* and *reflexively*, which I found very helpful (Mason, 2002).

## **6.1 Reading the data literally, interpretively and reflexively**

What is literal reading? Mason explains that it is to read data literally and to 'show interest in their literal form, content, structure, style layout, and so on' (2002, p.149). However, it turns out that 'pure literal reading is not possible, just as a purely objective description is not possible because the social world is always already interpreted and because what we see is shaped by how we see it' (Mason, 2002, p.149). As a result, there is a need for interpretive reading which helps researchers construct or document a version of what they think the data mean or represent, or what they think they can refer from the data. Furthermore, in order to make the data analysis complete and persuasive, Mason argues for the importance of reflexive reading, as a means to 'locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation of data' (p.149).

As Mason (2002) suggests, I read my data literally, interpretively and reflexively. I added comments and reflections in the margins alongside the data, which acted as a reminder about my new thinking on facets of the investigation because as my analysis progresses, new things might emerge as relevant, or new interpretations might be given to the same extract of data which needed to be recorded on my data. After that I came back to my research questions, thinking about how well the data addressed them, as well as how well the data would address my theoretical propositions.

## **6.2 Coding and creating data categories**

After three levels of reading on my data, the next step I took was to code my data and relate the codes to my research questions and my theories. I used NVIVO software for my data analysis by putting my research design into the project on computer and coding it, meanwhile analyzing the nodes as they were indicated in the design. It is

worth mentioning that in NVIVO software, nodes equal categories which I will talk about shortly, and that I can ask of any node what its relationship is to other nodes, either in the catalogue or in the coding it holds.

During my coding process, in order to achieve a holistic understanding of my data, I bore in mind the importance of linking codes, data categories and my theories together because according to Coffey & Atkinson (1996), codes, data categories, and concepts are related closely to one another, in that some fragments of data relate to some particular topic or theme. Coding helps to link all those data fragments to a particular idea or concept and these concepts are in turn related to one another, so the important analytic work lies in establishing and thinking about such linkages. My data analysis considered these linkages and adopted three coding methods: 'descriptive', 'topic' and 'analytical' coding (Richards, 2005, p.87).

Descriptive coding involves storing information about characteristics or attributes of the case being studied (Richards, 2005). My research design indicates the background and characteristics of my respondents. I kept this information systematically in table forms and stored it in my computer, which helped to remind me of the patterns and characteristics of my respondents. Appendix 10 attached in this thesis can provide an example of that. Except for descriptive coding, I used 'topic' and 'analytical' codings, both of which are 'interpretative processes' to gather all the text about a category (Richards, 2005, p.88).

Topic coding labels text according to its subject, but it usually involves little interpretation. When reading the text, I always asked 'what is this about?' If the answer was a topic for my project, I selected the text. If I had that topic already as a category, I selected it and coded it. If the topic had not been recorded as a category, I created the category, and then coded it. As a new topic appeared, I considered whether it deserved a place in my project. Together with descriptive coding and topic coding, analytical coding is used because it is central to qualitative enquiry, in that it

leads to theory emergence and theory affirmation (Richards, 2005). Analytical coding refers to coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning. It means that if 'you are considering the meanings in context, and creating categories that express new ideas about the data, coding to gather and reflect on all the data related to them' (Richards, 2005, p.94). For examples of descriptive and analytical coding, please see Appendix 11 and Appendix 12 of this dissertation.

In my data analysis, when I found a passage interesting, I selected it and asked the question: 'why am I interested in that?' If the answer was a category, where I wanted to code data, I made a category and carefully named it, then coded the selected text at the category. When I did the codings, I was fully aware of the importance of keeping the balance between topic and analytical coding by asking not just 'where does this text go' but 'why am I interested in that?' because topic coding will dominate when you are uncertain about what is to be done, or prevented from progressing (Richards, 2005). Apart from the codings, I found it a good practice to browse categories frequently, to explore the variety or similarities of the material being gathered, and to reflect on the idea or concept the category represents, and then write about it. The categories made could be seen as a continually changing representation of what I was finding in my material. In order to achieve speed, efficiency and reliability in my data analysis, I created a 'catalogue of category' (Richards, 2005, p. 108). This catalogue was useful in reviewing, clarifying, and strengthening ideas I was producing and it helped inform the growing structure of my research, such as the relations of categories and major dimensions of my research.

### **6.3 Addressing my theoretical concerns**

After finishing the structures of my node/category system in the data, I began to reflect on my data and explored how the data had addressed my theoretical framework about quality audit. According to Yin (2003), a good case study is the one



in which the explanations have reflected some theoretically significant propositions. This suggests that it is important to address the theoretical concerns in the data analysis.

I personally found the suggestion of Richards (2005) on addressing the theoretical concerns very useful in my data analysis. By following his suggestion, I revisited the goals and the design of my research, and asked myself the following questions:

- What am I seeking?
- What have I realistically achieved?
- How will I know if it is good enough?

The last question is a major area of debate in qualitative research because it raises philosophical issues of the nature of realities and their perception. It is a way for me to rethink my research outcome, what kind of outcome it is and whether it is satisfactory or not according to certain criteria.

### **6.3.1 What I am seeking**

Following coding, it was time for me to reflect on my data to make it clear what I was seeking. I kept in mind the importance of answering my three research questions about how quality audit has affected the work of academics from their perspectives. In order to address my research questions, I not only described but also analyzed my data because rich description can make my writing interesting, and 'to stop at describing the data is rather like describing the scene of a crime without trying to solve the crime' (Richards, 2005, p. 127). In any case, interpretation begins in the interview – every probe is an attempt at interpretation. Therefore analysis is 'the process of bringing order to the data, organizing what is there into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units' (Patton, 1987, p.144). The analysis of my data can explain my findings and attach significance to particular results.

To move on to the stage of analysis, I started to ask 'why' questions. For example, on the perceived impact of quality audit on undergraduate classroom teaching practice, I asked why quality audit had affected the teaching. This 'why' question was extended by the following questions: How has quality audit affected the teaching, positively or negatively? Why positive and why negative? Where does the positive/negative evidence come from? Is it a common view among academics? If, no, why not? Who is the main holder of this view? Why does she or he have this point of view?

### **6.3.2 What I have achieved**

After making clear what I was seeking, I began to reflect on what I have achieved, aiming to find out whether I could challenge and extend theories on quality audit in higher education because from Richards' (2005) point of view, it is important to make a theory from the study. There were two methods I used to find out what I had achieved in my research. One way was to read reports from similar studies to find out whether some were convincing, and meanwhile was critical of the studies I found boring, trivial or skewed by the position of the researcher and asked myself whether and how I could do better. The other way I did this was to reflect on the possible outcomes for my study, by analyzing and interpreting my data first, and then constructing my own theory from the data, next comparing it with the ones I adopted in my research, and finally illustrating the differences and similarities between these theories and the reasons behind the differences. In this way I could check whether the outcome of my data was satisfactory, and meanwhile challenge and extend the theories on quality audit in higher education in England.

My outcome was a kind of difference outcome which is a kind of analytical outcome, aiming to construct the difference (Richards, 2005). My research explored and extended existing theories on quality audit processes and cultures and showed the

need for more subtle explanations and understandings of quality audit because there were mixed views towards the audit. My research constructed these different perceptions on quality audit and then contrasted the patterns of these perceptions, aiming to provide a richer picture of quality audit in higher education.

### **6.3.3 Maintaining the quality of my research**

After reflecting on what I had realistically achieved, it is important to consider whether my outcome was valid enough. This could be interpreted as whether the outcome was satisfactory or not according to certain criteria. According to Patton (1990), it is important for the researcher to explain in clear terms, and convincingly, the methods of his data collection and analyses and his philosophical belief. This will enable the researcher to achieve accuracy in their findings because the credibility of the research finding depends on three distinct but related inquiry elements:

1. 'Rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that is carefully analyzed, with attention to issues of validity, reliability, and triangulation;
2. The credibility of the researcher, which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self, and
3. Philosophical belief in the phenomenological paradigm, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, and holistic thinking' (Patton, 1990, p.461)

As a PhD student, and a novice researcher, I am fully aware that the credibility of the researcher can affect the way findings are received. My principle was to report my research process as clearly as possible because it could reveal my understanding of how to do research (see section three). Meanwhile, I considered and followed suggestions from experienced researchers. For example, Cohen, et al (2000) suggests

that in a case study it is important to use semi-structured and open interviews, observation, narrative accounts and documents, and diaries, rather than surveys and experiments. After having considered the characteristics and the needs of my own research, I decided to use semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. In the process of conducting my interviews, I paid attention to the strategies of interviewing different people and found interviewing senior people later (Cohen, et al, 2000) very effective. What I did was to interview academic respondents first and then manager- academic respondents, in order to get a holistic picture of the impact of quality audit on a department/school and on the respondents. This meant that at the time of seeing the manager-academic respondents, I was well informed about the department/school/faculty in question, and I thus made the most effective use of our discussion time. As to my philosophical belief, I have made use of the interpretative research paradigm because it could build gradual pictures through interpretations that represent complex reality of the particular social life (Holliday, 2002). Therefore, I could interpret the different views of academics towards quality audit, so I managed to present rich data on how quality audit had affected the work of academics.

### **6.3.3.1 Validity**

I paid attention to other key criteria concerned with the quality of research, such as, validity and reliability, which are considered relevant in judging the quality of case study research (Yin, 2003). In general validity is viewed as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers whereas reliability is the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions (Silverman, 2001).

It is obvious that Silverman's view emphasizes the extent of accurate accounts of social phenomena. This accords well with the view of Cohen et al (2000) that

validity is 'the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher' (p.105). However, the fact is that it is hard for research to be 100 per cent valid because the subjectivity of respondents, together with their opinions, attitudes and perspectives contribute to a degree of bias. This suggests that validity is not only concerned with accuracy of the account, it can also be seen as an issue of qualitative research in general (Richards, 2005). Therefore it is better to perceive validity as a matter of degree rather than an absolute state (Cohen et al, 2000) because it is judged by the extent to which an account accurately represents the data collected, the extent to which all relevant views are represented, the adequate use of the original data and the impact of the research design/ approach on the result.

My research has considered the above interpretations of validity. Each stage of my research, such as concepts development, research questions, data collection and analyses, and research findings, has exhibited validity through detailed description, analysis and interpretation of the information gathered and the research methods I used. For example, in my data analysis, I interpreted my data in meaningful and sensitive ways, rather than imposing my interpretation inappropriately or without justification. Although it is undeniable that the interpretation of my data is value-laden because it is based on my knowledge, experience, and my international student status, I managed to maintain the validity of my finding because of two main reasons.

One reason is that I do not over generalise my finding is because the issue of generalization in qualitative research is contentious and because opinion differs on whether it is possible to generalize and if it is, on the extent to which the researcher can ensure generalisability (Stake, 1995). My research is a single-case study. I would like my case study to make a contribution to theoretical generalization on the

perceived impact of quality audit on the work of academics in England because my goal is to expand theories of quality audit and to generalise my findings to theoretical propositions of quality audit, on the basis that a case study should strive to extend or generalise theoretical propositions (Yin, 1993). Therefore I did not intend to either undertake statistical generalisation or generalise my findings to all the universities in England. Instead, I provided readers with a detailed description of my case study's context, and with interpretations and descriptions of my case, which serves to specify everything that a reader may need to know in order to understand my findings, so they could make their own generalisations from my study (Stake, 1995).

The other reason why I could maintain the validity of my finding is that I recognized the limitation of my research by openly declaring the factors which could impact upon the perspective that I attempted to address (See section eight). I come from China and I am studying the UK HE system. This international experience could be positive because it enables me not to take anything for granted. Considering that my perceptions of quality audit might be different from that of the academics, I presented all my data in detail and organised academics' views into different patterns and compared these patterns in order to present readers with the complex impact of quality audit on the work of academics. The way of reflecting on my limitation thus helped me maintain the validity of my research.

#### **6.3.3.2 Reliability**

Reliability, like validity, is another important measure of quality of qualitative research. According to Silverman (2001), reliability is the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions. What Silverman suggests is that reliability concerns with the consistency over time. In order to achieve this consistency, Mason (2002) argues that it is important to put emphasis on the accuracy of the research

strategies because reliability involves the extent to which the research methods and techniques are accurate. In similar vein, Richards (2005) suggests that reliability is the aim for a result the audience can rely on, and that the best way to assure reliability is to have well-validated procedures in all that the researcher does.

LeCompte, et al. (1993) classifies reliability into internal reliability and external reliability. Internal reliability concerns the degree to which other researchers applying similar constructs would match these to data in the same way as original researchers. Demonstration of internal reliability is believed to increase confidence in the logical consistency with which data analysis has been done. External reliability concerns the reproducibility of entire studies, in the sense that other researchers studying the same or similar settings would generate the same findings. LeCompte, et al. (1993) offers five suggestions to improve reliability of research. First, a research report should identify the status position taken by the researcher in the field, such as the gender or age. Secondly, the researcher should tell who offered data. Thirdly, the researcher should tell the social situations of the research. Fourthly, a full account should be given of the theories and ideas that informed the research. Fifthly, it is necessary to have a detailed account of all aspects of methods used.

In order to achieve reliability of my research findings, I first identified my international student status, my working experience in China, and the neutral position taken in my research. I interpreted my role as providing a clear, detailed and in-depth description and sufficient depth of analysis so that readers are able consider the extent to which the findings resonate with their own experience of quality audit in their own institutions. Then I identified who my respondents were and what my case study university was like and the context in which my research was carried out. Next I presented the theories of quality audit I was going to test in my case study. Finally, I described clearly the approach to and procedures for my data collection and analysis.

I also provided justification for why these procedures were appropriate within the context of my study. The processes I used to generate themes, concepts or theories from the data were clearly documented. Moreover, the reference to external evidence including previous qualitative studies to test the conclusions from my analysis as appropriate are adopted. In this way, my research maintains its reliability. As a result, the quality of my research is assured. My research also fulfils its purpose of providing readers detailed and rich information on the perceived impact of quality audit in a university in England.

### **Section seven: Limitation of my research**

In spite of all the above endeavours I took to assure the quality of my research, there are some limitations in my research. For example, I did not use focus group interviews, where respondents are offered some topic or stimulus material and then encouraged to discuss it amongst themselves (Kvale, 1996). Group interview has the advantage of yielding a wide range of responses. This kind of interview is useful 'where a group of people have been working together for some time or for common purpose, or where it is seen as important that everyone concerned is aware of what others in the group are saying' (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.287).

Although I intended to undertake group interviews, this did not happen for two main reasons. One is because my research topic is a sensitive one. Some of my interviewees did not want their departments and their colleagues to know that they were interviewed. I am obliged to keep the identity of the interviewees anonymous, so it might be inappropriate for me to arrange group interviews. The other is the disadvantage of group interviews. One disadvantage is that group interview is time consuming to arrange, and is 'of little use in allowing personal matters to emerge, or in circumstances where the researcher has to aim a series of follow-up questions at one specific member of the group' (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.287). Instead group



interviews could 'drown out certain views', (Denscombe, 2003, p.168).... Because 'the opinions expressed are ones that are perceived to be 'acceptable' within the group. Where group members regard their opinions as contrary to prevailing opinion within the group, they might be inclined to keep quiet, or moderate their views somewhat' (Denscombe, 2003, p.168).

Another limitation of my research is that there was a lack of cooperation from the academics in one or two of my interviews. One reason is that my research topic is sensitive. Another reason is that my assurance of confidentiality might be weak, or it was perceived to be more likely to be breached by the academics in these interviews because I am a young looking student. Therefore, I might have given the impression of a lack of credibility or ability to keep my promise of confidentiality to these two academics.

The third limitation of my research is that although on most occasions I could choose my respondent sample freely in the seven departments/schools researched, in one science-related department, the Head gave me a list of academics to interview. This Head might have wanted me to do me a favour by recommending his colleagues, but this unfortunately had limited my access to the other academics who might show interest in my research. It is likely that this Head might have chosen the people he knew well and he thought would give a favourable impression of the department. Therefore my respondent samples were not firmly based on my theoretical sampling as they were for other departments.

The fourth limitation of my research is that it is a single case study, although it could provide readers with a detailed and rich description of how quality audit had affected the work of respondents in my case study university, and it could make a theoretical generalization, it has little connection with the post-1992 universities in England. It is not feasible for me to compare the finding of my case study with that of the post

-1992 universities to reveal the similarities and differences because these universities have different contexts. This means that the study cannot provide a holistic picture of quality audit in England.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter has set out my research design, providing a rationale for the single-case study approach and detailing the development of the case study. The procedures used in data collection and analysis have been described and analyzed. Both the limitations and the strengths of my research have been identified and issues relating to ethical considerations have been discussed.

My dissertation was based on an interpretive approach to exploring and developing an in-depth understanding of how academics in a research-intensive pre-1992 university in England perceived the impact of quality audit on their work. The interpretive approach not only enabled me to understand the complex perceptions of respondents on quality audit but also gradually revealed the mixed impact of quality audit on the work of academics, so I could categorise these different impacts based on the various views and perceptions

I employed a single case study as my research approach because I could focus on one university in England which was selected according to their top ranking in teaching excellence. In the case study I used theoretical sampling and finally chose 64 academics, according to their level of seniority and gender, from seven different departments/schools. In order to develop gradual understanding of respondents' views on quality audit and to provide 'rich' data on respondents' perception of quality audit, I used semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to explore respondents' views in two continuous phases from January 2007 to October 2007. All these 64 respondents signed an informed consent form following appropriate

research ethics practices. During the interviews, I established trust and rapport with the majority of my respondents which enhanced the research process and data collection as they became confident to express their views and feelings concerning quality audit, its related quality assurance mechanisms and its impact on their work.

All my interviews were taped recorded and transcribed with care. During my data analysis, I first did three levels of reading on my data, literally, interpretively and reflexively, in order to gain full understanding of it. I then analyzed my data using NVIVO software and categorized my data according to different themes which were developed according to my theories of quality audit. After the data analysis, I reflected on my research, to find out what I wanted to achieve, what I had achieved and whether what I achieved was satisfactory or not. These reflections increased my confidence in the quality of my research.

Meanwhile I am fully aware that there are limitations of my research, such as, my student status, the use of semi-structured interviews, no absence of group interviews, and a biased sample in one selected department. It is obvious that my findings do not aim to be generalisable but, rather, offer a detailed study of how quality audit has affected the work of academics in one research-intensive pre-1992 university in England. I prefer to treat my research as a starting point for further research on exploring how academics perceived the impact of quality audit on their work.

## **Chapter 7: Working Conditions of Academic Respondents in my Case Study University**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I take a close look inside a research-intensive pre-1992 university to find out how 64 academic staff interviewed perceived their working conditions in the context of quality audit processes, cultures, and mechanisms. I aim to explore the attitudes of respondents towards their workload and find out how they have balanced their research, teaching, and administration. Differences between respondents on the basis of their subject and level of seniority are taken into consideration in the analysis of their workload. This chapter examines whether there is a connection between the perceived heavy workload of academics and quality audit processes etc, revealing whether the audit was perceived as the main cause of this problem.

This chapter will begin with a holistic picture of respondents' workload in the context of quality audit, then analyze the main drivers to respondent's work overload, revealing whether these drivers are related to quality audit processes etc or not. Finally, this chapter will illustrate why respondents in general held negative attitudes towards administrative jobs which include quality audit related tasks, and to find out the reasons why the majority of respondents have been taking on administrative roles in the case study university.

### **Section one: Workload of academics**

An analysis of the interview data suggests that the majority of respondents feel burdened with a heavy workload. Only seven out of sixty-four respondents asserted that they were satisfied with their workload. All these seven respondents were in a

junior position and had worked for less than fifteen years in the case study university. Five of them were lecturers and two were teaching fellows. There were various reasons why these respondents found their workload acceptable, such as, research leave, reduced administrative responsibilities, and getting used to their workload. For example, one male lecturer said that he was happy with his workload because of his research leave:

*Reasonably happy, because I do a lot of teaching and I am on research leave, so you have 50% extra teaching when you have research leave... in the second semester..., but I really can't complain at the moment, especially when I have fairly low administrative load... (Respondent 32)*

Except for research leave, reduced administrative jobs have become another important reason for respondents feeling satisfied with their workload. For example, a male lecturer in a social science school asserted that he felt relieved without administrative jobs:

*Err, ... at the moment, yes. it is better that ... I give up the administration (Respondent 40)*

The other five respondents revealed that they did not want to make a fuss about their workload because they had got used to it. A female lecturer in an arts related department for example, made it clear that she had become so used to her workload that she did not want to complain about it:

*I am happy to spend a bit more time on ... research, but perhaps I get more used to .... This is my second ... full year teaching and I get more ... used to it, so I will be able to ... prepare that and spend more time on research ... in term. (Respondent 17)*

### **1.1 Respondents with a heavy workload**

Except for the 7 respondents who were happy with their workload, the other 57 respondents in the case study university all perceived their workload as heavy, which is based on their perceptions not their actual workload. This is similar to the finding

of Kinman, et al. (2006) and Tytherleigh, et al. (2005) that academics' workload is heavy in the UK. The interview data reveals that many respondents in this case study described their workload as a major problem and articulated that their workload was beyond what they regarded as a reasonable expectation. For example, a male lecturer in a medical related course asserted that his workload was unreasonable:

*It (workload) is not what I expect.... It is excessive. (Respondent 33)*

A male respondent with quality assurance responsibilities in a social science school shared a similar view and described his workload as a 'nightmare':

*Am I happy with it (workload) ?... Generally, NO, it is nightmare! It is nightmare! I have got far too much to do. (laughter) (Respondent 64)*

There is evidence that in order to deal with a heavy workload, most respondents chose to extend their work out of office hours. For example, a female lecturer in a social science school found she had no choice but to work on weekends.

*I work every weekend. (Respondent 20)*

Some other respondents expressed a similar view. For example, a male lecturer in a medical related school articulated that he just worked over the weekend:

*For example, I am at work this Saturday, to finish work ready for next week's work. (Respondent 26)*

The above examples suggest that academics have been working out of office hours when facing a heavy workload. This is identical with the finding of Kinman, et al. (2006) and Tytherleigh, et al (2005) that there was a long working hours' culture among academics in the UK. A further analysis of the interview data reveals that academic respondents who had worked over ten years in the case study university were more likely to claim that they were overworked due to accumulation of their responsibilities. For example, a male professor in charge of undergraduate studies in an Arts faculty explained that it was because academics in early career would take their workload for granted, while academics in later career used to have lighter workload, so they would find their current workload heavy:

*... You know, when I first arrived here, I was very inexperienced and I took it (administrative job) for granted. ...but some old academics said that it was ridiculous to have all these administrative burdens. (Respondent 5)*

A male head of school of an art related course shared the view of respondent 5 and explained that it was because the pressure on all the academics increased, but comparatively speaking, the academics in their early academic career were less likely to notice the difference:

*Yes. ... The pressure on teaching, research and administration has increased in the past 25 years, so it means that older academics find the current ways of doing things are quite alien to them, while younger staff will not notice much difference. (Respondent 11)*

What respondent 11 suggested was that academic respondents in their late career liked to complain about their heavy administration load. One explanation was that these senior academic respondents had worked such a long time in the department/school that they would be expected to become administrators, leaders, or to take some other jobs, so they might have got more jobs to do than the respondents who had worked a shorter time in the university.

However, six other academic respondents who had worked in academe less than five years held a different view and argued that it was the junior staff who did most administrative jobs in their departments/schools. For example, a male lecturer in a science related school pointed out that his department always gave administrative jobs to young staff:

*I think, ... it is a bit... the tradition of this department that ... if I can put it politely ... to preserve the time of professors, and give more heavy workload... to junior member of staff. I think that is changing ... at the present administration, I don't say that it is ... purely self serving and I mean it supplies more ... to the junior staff. (Respondent 60)*

Respondent 60 implied that his department allocated administrative jobs unfairly and that administrative jobs had become the least popular task among respondents, resulting in disputes over their administration load. There is an indication that

respondents' length of years working in the case study university had influenced their administration workload and their perception of administration workload. For example, academic respondents in early career, including teaching fellows, found their workload more bearable than the senior staff. Take teaching fellow for example, most of them found their workload satisfactory. This confirms the previous finding that academics in early career were less likely to complain about their workload than academics in later career. A further analysis of the interview data suggests that it was because most teaching fellows were the people who just received their PhD and they had temporary jobs and nothing to compare their load with in the past, so in order to get permanent jobs, most of them would choose to work hard and to make less complaint about the work pressure. In contrast, most senior staff had got permanent contracts, so it would be easier for them to refuse administrative jobs than the young staff.

## **1.2 Reasons for respondents' perceived heavy workload**

Except for the years of working experience, there were some other factors which were perceived to have contributed to the workload of the respondents, such as, a lot of pressure to carry out research, a heavy teaching load, and large amounts of administrative tasks. The interview data demonstrates that pressure in research had become perceived as the most important factor to half of the respondents' in explaining their excessive workload. For example, a female director of quality assurance for a faculty of science emphasized that it was the RAE that had significantly increased the workload of academics:

*Of the workload, the huge impact is the RAE. There is a tangible fear that we must get a good result next time. That stresses the academics. (Respondent 7)*

There is evidence that due to the RAE, some academics had to reduce their input in teaching and administration. For example, a male lecturer in an engineering department found his teaching and administrative jobs suffered:



*(Laughter) There is a lot of pressure in research, ... particularly within ... getting research funding, and actually getting on ... with the research... is difficult, which in turn has impact ... on ... how much effort ... you can put in teaching, and similarly ... with administration. (Respondent 27)*

Except for the research pressure, a high teaching load was regarded as another important cause for one third of respondents' heavy workload. For example, a female lecturer in a social science department was worried about her heavy teaching load and explained that she had to apply for research grants in order to reduce her teaching loads:

*I mean I am not happy with the teaching loads. I ... mean comparison with other friends I had within other universities I had, it is the highest load. ... And the only way I can do research is because ... research grants brought me out of teaching, for half of the year. (Respondent 18)*

A female lecturer in the same department of respondent 18 expressed a similar concern about a heavy teaching load and argued that she had become frustrated when nearly all her teaching load was arranged in one teaching block:

*With the teaching, I am not happy, because I have too many units, which means that ... my teaching is the main task. There are five syllabus. You know, it is very time consuming. And most of my teaching... was in teaching block one, which I liked, but it also meant ... 10 hours a week. (Respondent 22)*

It is obvious that respondent 22 considered 10 hours a week as a heavy teaching load. However, a respondent in charge of learning and teaching in a social science department questioned the arguments about a heavy teaching load and contended that respondents in the case study university was much lower when compared with that of a post 1992 university. The different perceptions of teaching load among respondents can be explained by the fact that the case study university is so research focused that academics in general preferred research to teaching. Therefore respondents regarded 10 hours teaching a week as heavy.

Except for the above perceived research and teaching pressure, the third reason why nearly one third of respondents were dissatisfied with their workload was because of

their heavy administrative burdens. For example, a male lecturer in a science related department asserted that he had too many administrative jobs:

*Oh, that's a good question. Err, ... I am happy with my teaching loads. I feel that I do too much admin. ... (Respondent 37)*

When asked about his current administrative jobs, this respondent gave out a full list:

*I have to do some administration ... associated with teaching ... and administrating the course. Each of our unit ... of the assessment have conveyors, so course of lecture, maybe a unit or part of a unit. ... Unit has some administrative role. ... I convene for three units... and a year one course.... That means that you are responsible ... for administration for that unit, and any people teaching on that. There might be more than one person teaching on that.... You are also responsible for ... compiling a unit folder which contains ... handouts for the course. And it contains exam questions and you have to compile the exam paper, so you are responsible for compiling ... a folder for that unit, that is seen by the external examiners actually, so that we can show that we provide with the students and we can show that ... what we telling students about the course is actually affected. We can see that the exam questions don't ... overlap with the course work and you can check that there is no overlap in the different form of assessment, for instance, so I administer the three courses. (Respondent 37)*

It is noticeable that this respondent's administrative jobs were related to his teaching. According to the majority of manager-academic respondents, relating administrative jobs with teaching had become a popular trend in the case study university. However, in the view of academic respondents, not all their administrative jobs were connected with their teaching and research. For example, a male teaching fellow in an art related department found himself burdened with an administrative job which was perceived as little related to his teaching:

*I am in the ethics ... committee. That means that in the third year, there are a lot of joint single degrees and ... people do take the final essay which accounts as their final degree. My responsibility is ... to advise ... people what regulations are.... And then sign the mark for, the double blind mark.... Then there is faculty marking dissertation. ...I sit on the graduate committee and discuss all issues for ... students and anything for admissions. ... I also sit on the staff student committee. That is where we discuss problems and ... if there is any problem, we take them to the departmental meeting and .... (Respondent 51)*

Although respondent 51 perceived his administrative job as not related to teaching,

this job was actually related to teaching because it was concerned with marking for students. This confirms that respondents in general tended to treat administrative work as the job they least want to do. An analysis of the interview data reveals that an important reason why respondents showed little interest in administrative jobs was because their teaching and research loads were not reduced even when they were given extra administrative jobs. For example, a male professor in a medicine related course gave an example to illustrate how the administration workload was imposed upon academic staff in his department:

*I think there is a problem here that ... we ask people to do administration, but we don't say ... we are going to free some time for you ... to do the administration, so ... for example, when I became ... head of the ... programme, and head of division, it wasn't the case of ... you had this workload, and we were going to take ... the 50% workload off you... and make you head of division, we expect you to use that 50% time ... to be head of division. ... It is the case that you have this workload and ... you are going to take this ... programme as well, and the division as well, so you get extra administrative burden. ... That is the problem. That is not just the problem for me. That's the problem for most people ... who do administration in the university and ... they do it as well as they doing their ordinary work. (Respondent 40)*

What respondent 40 suggested was that the practice that departments did not free some time for academics to do administration had made respondents in general show resistance to administrative jobs. Fifteen other respondents expressed their resentment about administrative jobs and asserted that these jobs cost them a lot of time and were not specified in their contracts, though the contract was very vague anyway. A female senior lecturer in a social science school gave the following examples:

*Quite a lot of the ... tasks that expected ... in terms of quality assurance and admin ... are ... not really specified ... in terms of ... the job description that I get when I signed ...the contract when I go to the university. It is all hidden day to day today. ... Actually, there is a major demand... on senior academic time, so (pause) two find balanced time ... between the ... three major roles, which is teaching, admin, ... and research as a senior lecturer, ... is very difficult. (Respondent 19)*

It is obvious that respondent 19 felt pressurized by administration, especially by the

quality assurance related jobs because they were beyond what she felt were a reasonable expectation. Respondent 19 was not unique in her dislike of quality assurance jobs because respondents in general regarded quality audit related work as an administrative task and did not consider this to be part of the work of an academic. A further analysis of the interview data suggests that quality audit was perceived as one factor causing the heavy workload of academics, especially those who were responsible for quality assurance in the department/school. For example, a male lecturer in a science related school found that his quality assurance work was a nightmare:

*Well, I confess that I find it (quality assurance work) a nightmare. It wouldn't be my choice to do ... and one of the issues you probably ... understand here ... is ... before coming to the university, I taught ... in the US system ... for ... 16 years, so ... to me, the idea of academics ... having major administrative roles ... and we are doing this and it is not very common. Most of it is done ... by professional administrators, so in that respect, that is not what I am ... trying to do and I am interested in doing academics. I find it, ... frankly, just a lot of paper work and it is boring ... and it is to fulfilling certain objectives ... and I am not sure ... there is a role for it, to ensure the quality to produce document to say 'quality'. ... (Respondent 60)*

Respondent 60 showed an anger and resentment against quality assurance work. The main reason was because he felt that quality assurance jobs were not part of academic work, especially when it involved large amounts of paper work, which as a result had made respondents cast doubt on the purpose and the effect of quality audit. However, in spite of the time consuming nature of quality assurance jobs, there is little evidence that quality audit are perceived as the main cause of academics' heavy workload. Instead, six senior manager-academic respondents argued that the main reason for academics' heavy work was because of the complicated and reformed higher education system in England. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of arts made this view explicit:

*... Over the ten years, the burden (of administration) is getting greater and greater. It is not just quality assurance. It is everything, you know, involves. You know the whole system is more complicated and like the education survey and all these kind of things to do with staff development and progression and everything associated*

*with admission. The range of task just becomes multiplied. The point is a lot of these things do not need have to be done by academics, but they have been done by academics. That's the problem. (Respondent 5)*

What respondent 5 implied was that the case study university took in more students due to the massification of higher education, so it produced more administrative jobs as well as teaching for the academics. Except for the complicated higher education system, the lack of administrators at the departmental level was perceived as another reason why academics had to take on more administrative jobs. For example, a respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of science showed his concern that there were not enough administrators in the department:

*The administration. ... There are not enough highly qualified administrators and there are not enough administrators. Full stop. (Long pause) ...The lack of administrators put work on academics. (Respondent 7)*

In general, the interview data reveals that teaching, research, and administrative jobs were perceived as the main factors causing a heavy workload for academic respondents, and that quality audit was not the main cause of most respondents' work overload, in spite of the fact that many respondents treated audit related jobs as bureaucratic and time consuming. As is revealed in the previous section, the majority of respondents complained about their heavy workload, but in the view of four manager-academic respondents, not all the complaints about heavy workload should be taken seriously because some academics had been using this complaint as a self defense strategy. For example, a director of learning and teaching in a social science department argued that some academics complaining about their workload were unjustified in doing so and pointed out that it was time for academics to learn to increase their work efficiency:

*My personal view ... is ... not all claims to being overworked should be taken seriously.... Well, some people felt overworked by having to get here early in this morning. You know,... at one thing, it is very clear that they were overworked is very objective, so some people don't feel overworked by working as twice as much as somebody, clearly, so ... some people felt overworked, when they are not actually doing it. What I mean is that once you treat the fact they feel that it is taken seriously, it is absolutely. You might want to explore why that was the case.*

*Some case is because they get too much to wait to do. In some cases, maybe that ... is not so clear. And they make you think about how you deal with that. ...From my point of view, most people complained about how heavy their work load are ... are actually not the people ... doing the most work, but it is a good defense strategy. If you made a good noise of how terrible your workload is, and how you couldn't possibly cope with anything else.... Then of course people don't ask you to do anything else. (Respondent 64)*

Respondent 64 was very critical of academics finding excuses not to do administrative jobs or to do less work, which suggests that this respondent did not think the workload of academics was as heavy as they perceived it to be. Later on in the interview, this respondent gave examples to illustrate that the general workload of academics was actually lower when compared with that of people who worked outside the university:

*Some of my colleagues may see me being harsh.... Generally speaking,... people outside the university centre ... tends to be better organized ... and have a better appreciation ... of what's a lot of work is or different appreciation , so there are people who worked elsewhere and some of them worked in new university ... their workloads are a lot higher. ... A lot higher, if they work in the public sector or they probably did the management and something like that. (Respondent 64)*

Respondent 64 was unique in implying that the workload of respondents in the case study university was lighter when compared with that in a pre-1992 university. This different view implied that the position of academics would influence their perception of workload. Respondent 64 was a director for learning and teaching, he dealt with the workload allocation of academics in his school, and he had other part-time jobs. Therefore he had a good knowledge of the general workload of academics, especially when he compared these demands with that of people who worked outside the university. Another implication of respondent 64's remarks is that the case study university was research – focused, so most academics would like to treat research and teaching as their priority, and that in order to have more time for either teaching or research, academics would like to let others know that their workload is heavy, so that they could make an argument to have less or be removed from some administrative jobs. The view that the case study university was research -

led was shared by the majority of respondents, which will be analyzed in the section below.

### **1.3 Imbalance of teaching, research and administration**

The interview data indicates that because the case study university was research focused, most respondents tended to focus on their research. For example, a female lecturer in an art related department said that she was research - focused because of the research - centered culture in her department:

*The department as a whole is quite ... keen on research ... and research excellence that kind of things, so I was lucky at the beginning ... on a research leave very soon after my arriving, the second year and my last year. The whole ... of the year I was on research leave writing, but ... the first year I was here and this year ... I do full teaching load as well, so it is a mixture of both. (Respondent 17)*

A male lecturer in an engineering department expressed a similar view and confirmed that it had become a common practice for academics to put research as their first priority in the case study university:

*I feel that all academics could put a lot more time in their teaching ... if they weren't doing their research. That cannot be true, so (pause) you have to draw the line someway.... I do think ... the pressure on research ... at the moment, particularly when you get funding, actually... does have impact on teaching, because ... it means that we have to spend more time ... on these business to get funding and ... on the whole, I wouldn't say there is so much issue doing the ... research. It is more ... trying to get funding and ... so on to keep your research going. (Pause) And if you are going to ... carry on doing the research, then the only place ... you can make space, is to give up your teaching and your admin. See what I mean? (Respondent 27)*

What respondent 27 implied was that respondents in the case study university had little choice but to focus on research, which as a result had affected respondents' input into teaching and administration. This confirms the fact that research was the priority of most academic respondents in the case study university. However, the interview data suggests that although most respondents treated research as their

priority, 62 out of 64 respondents had been undertaking a mixture of teaching, research and administration work in the past academic year. 50 respondents expressed their concern at the difficulty in balancing their teaching, research, and administration roles. This finding corresponds with that of three national surveys that the work overload of academics in the UK has caused an imbalance of teaching, research, and administration (Kinman & Jones, 2003; Kinman, et al., 2006; and Tytherleigh, et al., 2005).

In the case study university when respondents were facing difficulty in balancing their teaching, research, and administration, it had become a common practice for them to limit their time to either research or teaching. Fifteen out of sixty-four respondents, mainly the lecturer respondents, indicated that they had to sacrifice their research time due to the the imbalance of teaching, research, and administration. One example is that a male lecturer in a science department argued that his research suffered because he had prioritised his teaching

*Well, most of the teaching is essential. It has to ... be done, but I tried in contrast previous years, to do an adequate job ... with teaching, without putting extra time in, ... the admin has to be done. And the research gets pushed in time ... to slip over. (Respondent 29)*

The reduced input in research can be explained by the fact that research has a longer time scale, so it is easier to put aside for things that make more immediate, urgent demands on time, such as teaching or administration. However, the majority of respondents asserted that they still found time for their research. Instead, these respondents chose to either arrange their teaching, research, and administration in different proportions, or work out of office hours, such as early mornings, late nights and weekends. A couple of respondents felt that they had become workaholics under the pressure of a heavy workload. For example, a female lecturer in a social science department made this view explicit:

*I am workaholic, which means I work 40 hours a week, 10 hours a day which means that ... in weekend, I am in office. (pause) and I really like it. (Respondent 22)*



What respondent 22 implied was that she not only worked 10 hours in the weekdays, but also worked long hours at the weekends. Respondent 22 showed great passion in her work in spite of the heavy workload. An analysis of the interview data suggests that except for working out of office hours, a couple of respondents preferred to work faster and more efficiently in their office hours. For example, a male senior lecturer in an engineering department decided to stop working at home after having done it for years:

*It was difficult. I have a particular way of doing things. ... For myself, the main way I work is ... to work, basically solid from 9 to 5. I tend not to take tea break, lunch break, so just ... work all the way through, but then go home and just stop. ... This year I decide to stop ... more less ... at 5 o'clock, and do other things in the evening. (Respondent 31)*

What respondent 31 suggested was that he increased his work pace to reduce his work pressure. In similar vein, a female lecturer in an art department chose to increase her work efficiency:

*Well, by working very fast. ... I always work very fast, because I don't want to be tied ... and I try to fix too many things in a short time. (Respondent 43)*

The above data suggests that a research – centered culture in the case study university had greatly influenced respondents' attitude towards teaching and research, in that respondents in general showed preference to do research. However, in spite of this preference, the majority of respondents have a mixture of teaching, research and administration, which made them feel over-worked. There is evidence that respondents had been using various strategies to balance their work, such as reducing their input in research/teaching, working extra hours, and increasing work efficiency. The different strategies suggest that respondents held different attitudes towards their work. Reducing input in teaching/research suggests that respondents were reacting in a passive way when facing a heavy workload. However, a number reacted by increasing work efficiency suggesting that some respondents had been actively coping with their changed workload.

#### 1.4 Respondents' resistance to administration jobs

As is revealed in the previous sections, academic respondents in general showed preference for research, and showed least interest in administrative jobs. This section is going to analyze the reasons behind this resistance to administration.

In the case study university although the majority of respondents had been doing administrative jobs, academic and manager-academic respondents in general held different views towards administrative jobs. For example, the majority of academic respondents treated administrative jobs as a burden upon them. In contrast, nearly one third of manager-academics argued that a lot of administrative jobs were important because they were teaching and research related, and that as the academics did not trust non-academics to do administrative jobs this meant that the academics should take on these tasks. This difference in view between academics and manager-academics suggests that administrative jobs have become a contentious issue between these groups. For example, a head of school of a medical related course argued that academics had to take on administrative jobs which were teaching/research related. He gave an example to illustrate how academics kept control of admission jobs:

*Most admin and most colleagues do is related to, probably related to teaching or research, not many people say not related to that. Particularly, teaching related admin, academics stay control. There is element of entirely not trusting of non-academics to take that workload all over.... If you say, err, (long pause) that academics don't have to get involved in admission at all, which is one thing we brought up 6 months ago at Senate. There are some people would be very worried about that because they would like to be able to retain control of that process, so they can decide who get admitted.... (Respondent 10)*

What respondent 10 argued was that it had become a common practice for academics to do administrative jobs which were teaching or research related, and that academics chose to do these jobs because they did not trust administrators to do them. A director of teaching and learning in a social science department shared the views of respondent 10 and asserted that although academics complained about administrative

jobs, it did not necessarily mean that these academics wanted the jobs to be taken on by someone else:

*I think the thing is ... they (academics) need moan about the work they do. And if you said: 'ok then I will take it off you and give it to somebody else', he might be quite unhappy. Why they are unhappy? Because they have got to find something else to do. ... (Respondent 64)*

Compared with the above manager-academic respondents, many academics were very critical of administrative tasks and articulated that these jobs were the thing they least wanted to do. For example, a male professor in a medical related course argued that most academics would not choose to do administrative jobs:

*Well, they think that ... staff choose to do administration?! Err, ... it will be interesting to say how you find ... asking people there. There are some people who ... like administration, but some people get real kick of it. ... You know, they like the power ..., and they like being able to do something ... and being able to change there. And there are some people who are really good at ... and they love teaching and research and whatever, and they don't really ... want to do administration, but they feel obliged to do it. I think there is quite a few people here ... and I am sure, in other parts of the university who are doing administration and ... they don't really ... want to. (Respondent 40)*

It is obvious that respondent 40 showed strong resentment toward administrative jobs and perceived quality audit related roles as part of the administration to exert burden upon academics. In spite of respondents' resistance to administrative jobs, 62 out of 64 respondents had been doing administrative jobs in the past academic year. The section below is going to analyze why these respondents had been taking on administrative jobs.

### **1.5 Reasons for taking on administrative jobs**

The interview data reveals that there are a few reasons why respondents had to do administrative jobs. These reasons are listed below according to their perceived importance by the academic respondents. Firstly, academic respondents were expected to do different jobs as part of their normal workload. Secondly, doing

administrative jobs would benefit academics' promotion chances. Thirdly, some academic respondents did administrative jobs because it was associated with the responsibilities of seniority. Fourthly, administrative jobs were stated in some academics' formal contract. These respondents were mainly teaching fellows, and people responsible for teaching at department and faculty level.

According to most respondents, the reason why they had to take on administrative jobs was because they were asked to do them as part of their workload. There were plenty of examples in the interviews where respondents felt that they had no choice but to accept an administrative job passively. For example, a male professor in an art department argued that it was because academics were expected to do different jobs, so they had to do administrative jobs in their department:

*I think it is to ensure that everyone does it a bit ... and that people don't just do research and teaching. (Respondent 41)*

What respondent 41 suggests is that it has become a common practice to require academics to do administrative jobs, but the majority of respondents in the case study university preferred to spend more time on their research, so it is inevitable that academic respondents in general would treat administrative jobs as unimportant and as an extra burden and therefore show resistance to these jobs.

Except for the expectation from the department/school for academics to do administrative jobs, there is a perception that respondents did administrative jobs in order to help with their promotion. This view was widely accepted by academic respondents in their early career and manager-academic respondents. For example, a male lecturer in a medical related course stated that administrative jobs had benefited his promotion:

*I was asked to do it and I knew it would be necessary for promotion i.e. more salary. (Respondent 26)*

What respondent 26 implied was that although academics in general showed

resistance to administrative jobs, university/department policy on promotion could encourage academics to take on administrative roles. However, there was a worry among three manager-academic respondents that linking administration with promotion would make academics show less interest in administrative jobs after their promotion. For example, a head of a medical related school made this view explicit:

*The other ... driver has been the promotion procedure, so I can say this year, in order to get promoted, from lecturer to senior lecturer, from senior lecturer to reader and then to professor, you have to show excellence in two or three areas of activities, the teaching, research and administration, so quite a lot of people in order to get promoted, maybe their research wasn't quite so good, so they have taken on administrative tasks and in order to be able to get tick in that box, and get promoted, so I think that is the huge constraint... on people keeping admin task. It has got to change, because the new career pathway system comes in place in August which means people just progress to senior lecturer, so we won't have to artificially, if you like, take on administrative tasks just to get promoted.(Respondent 10)*

What respondent 10 suggested was that administrative jobs were box-ticking exercises and a superficial activity for academics to conduct in order to jump through the promotion hoop, so when academics got promoted, they would lose their interest in carrying on with administrative responsibilities. Except for the purpose of promotion, another reason for academics to take on administrative jobs was because of their seniority. This view was mainly shared by respondents who had worked for over ten years in the case study institution and who were professors or senior lecturers. For example, a professor in a medical related course indicated that he had to do administrative jobs because of his position as a professor:

*So you are right, you are a professor, why you take on the administrative job? ... I guess it is because... it is expected of you and it expected you to show leadership. (Respondent 40)*

A similar view was expressed by respondent 41 who was a professor in a social science related department. Respondent 41 expressed his reluctance to take on administrative jobs:

*Seniority. It is the responsibility that you have to take on, ... but if you are lucky, you can choose which one to do. Before I was at the school, I was director for*

*research , ... so it was natural progression to be head of school.... at the moment, I think it is the university contract. You have to do some teaching, ... some research and some administration. (Respondent 41)*

What respondent 41 implied was that he had to take on administrative jobs, but there is little indication that he was happy about this. Further analysis of the interview data reveals that not only professors but senior lecturers had been doing administrative jobs because of their senior position. For example, a male senior lecturer in an engineering department argued that it had become a common practice for senior lecturers to do administrative jobs in his department:

*I guess the main reason is that my head of department asked me to do it. I think academic in the department, ... we should take ... on admin roles, especially at senior lecturer level. (Respondent 27)*

A senior lecturer in a social science department confirmed the view of respondent 27 and asserted that being a member of senior staff had given him little choice but to take on quality assurance jobs:

*Well, partly they are part of my ... role. As a programme director, quality assurance for the degree ... is my role. ... then as a senior member of the staff in the department, ... it is expected of me that I take part,... at the departmental level, ... like management roles, and that sort of stuff. (Respondent 19)*

It is noticeable that neither professors nor senior lecturers had expressed their willingness to do administrative jobs, but treated these jobs as another chore to complete. This suggests that academics still held a traditional conception of academic work with their focus on either teaching or research. The interview data indicates that the fourth main reason for some teaching fellows, and people responsible for teaching at department/school and faculty to do administrative jobs was because it was specified in their contract. There is evidence that administrative jobs were specified in the contract of five academic respondents. For example, a male professor in a medical related course confirmed that administrative jobs by academics were stated by the university contract:

*Yes, I think that is part of it (university contract). If you look at the criteria ... for*

*admission, it includes ... administration, so I think people take on administration when they feel they need to do so... for their promotion. (Respondent 40)*

All the above examples confirm that academic respondents in general were reluctant to do administrative jobs, although they normally found it hard to escape these jobs. Some faculty/departments had noticed academics' being over-burdened with administration, and that they began to take various measures to reduce this workload, such as employing more administrative staff to remove such responsibilities from academics, and reducing the teaching load of academics as compensation. One respondent interviewed even indicated that his/her Faculty planned to carry out a reform named 'schoolification':

*... There is a discussion last year, at the faculty board meeting, ... whether or not, we should divide ... the Arts Faculty into different schools... in order to get ... rid of the administrative burden from ... the academics to more a centralized structure ... schoolification. (Respondent 51)*

However, it is too soon to tell whether the 'schoolification' has reduced academics' administrative burdens or not. One reason is because the expansion of higher education has increased student numbers. The other reason, according to a senior administrator in academic staff development at the university, was because of university policy which adopted a much more managerial approach to administration more than ten years ago. As a result, this had made some administrators change their attitudes towards academics, and increased the administration loads of academics. This respondent argued that simply employing more administrative staff could not remove the administration load from academics:

*... It depends on employing the right people to be administrator, who is sympathetic to academic concerns and have enough knowledge and intelligence to do jobs that were done by academic staff before....(Respondent 53)*

What respondent 53 implied was that the current management of the case study university has adopted a managerial style which places an emphasis on efficiency and had increased academics' administration load, but academics in general still preferred collegiality, so these differences in outlook had made academics resentful

of administrative jobs, in spite of the fact that they were expected to treat them as part of their normal work.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, this chapter has analyzed and described the respondents' working conditions in the case study university, revealing that most respondents found their workload heavy, and that it was difficult for them to balance teaching, research and administration. Three main reasons help explain this perception: there is too much teaching, too much research, and too much administration. Meanwhile, there is an indication that the managerial approach which is prevalent in the case study university may have changed the relationship between administrators and academics which in turn had adversely affected the workload of academics because academics would do more administrative jobs although they did not want to.

The interview data suggests that because this case university is research intensive, the majority of respondents tended to become research-focused and preferred to spend most of their time either researching or teaching. Therefore, it had become a common practice for most respondents to treat administrative jobs as the least popular element of their work because it had brought them little benefit for their academic career development, except for a few individuals who had gained promotion as a result. However, the majority of respondents had to take on these jobs expected by their department and because these jobs were specified in their employment contract.

In spite of the fact that most academic respondents had been treating quality assurance roles as administrative jobs which were perceived to have increased their workload, there was little indication that quality assurance tasks had become the main reason for the respondents' heavy workload, except those who had specific



quality assurance jobs in the department/school. Moreover, the case study indicates that academic respondents and manager-academic respondents held different view towards administrative jobs because academic respondents tended to perceive them as a burden, whilst one third of manager-academics felt that most administrative jobs were teaching or research related, and so academics should take on these tasks.

## **Chapter 8: Perceived Impact of Individual External Quality Assurance Mechanisms on the Work of Academics**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines how four external quality assurance mechanisms (EQAMs) are perceived to have affected the work of respondents in the case study university. These mechanisms are the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education in England (QAA), external examining, 2005 National Student Survey (NSS), and professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The work of academics explored covers views about undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum, and power relations between academic and students. This chapter first looks at how respondents perceived the QAA and what perceived impact the QAA has had on the work of academics, then explores accounts of the effect of the external examining system on respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching and the curriculum, revealing what respondents liked and disliked about the external examining system. Next, the chapter analyzes whether the NSS has affected the work of respondents. Finally, the chapter describes and analyzes the PSRBs, exploring their impact on undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum, and power relations between academics and students. The chapter concludes with a comparison of respondents' attitudes towards these four external quality assurance mechanisms, revealing which mechanisms were most and least accepted by respondents and reasons for their acceptability.

### **Section one: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England (QAA)**

An analysis of the interview data demonstrates that 56 out of 64 respondents had some knowledge of the QAA, but the rest did not know about nor had heard of the

QAA. These 8 respondents came from different subject fields, 3 from the faculty of social science, 2 from a medical related course, and 3 from other faculties. This indicates that subject differences had little influence on respondents' knowledge of the QAA. However, there is evidence that academic respondents in their early academic career tended to know less about the QAA than respondents in late career. This is illustrated by the fact that 5 out of the 8 respondents who had no knowledge of the QAA had worked in the case study university less than 5 years. One explanation for these early career respondents' ignorance of the QAA was that they had been in the case study university for too short a time to have the chance to know about the QAA. As for the respondent who worked over 10 years in the case study university, their lack of knowledge of the QAA suggests that since the QAA stopped doing Subject Review, it becomes less invisible to academics, and that these respondents showed no/little interest in the activities of this body.

Among the 56 respondents who had some knowledge of the QAA, manager-academic respondents in general knew more about the QAA than academic respondents, which suggests that respondents' rank of position might have influenced respondents' knowledge of the QAA to some degree. One reason for academic respondents' possessing less interest in the QAA is that their priority was either teaching or research, so they had less of a stake in quality assurance jobs and work related to the QAA.

### **1.1 QAA as a double-edged sword**

Most respondents in my case study university perceived the QAA as a double - edged sword because it was important but with limitations. On the one hand, respondents articulated that the motives of the QAA were a good idea, particularly in that it made the university build up developmental structures which aimed to not only make academics understand and reflect about what they had done, but also ensure that

academics were performing well, so students could be assured of receiving a good education, especially when they began to pay top up fees in 2006. The interview data suggests that the QAA was perceived as important in four aspects: increasing awareness of good teaching among academics; providing an external opinion to ensure that universities and academics were performing well; comparing standards between universities; and helping future students choose universities. These views were not exclusive. Some respondents mentioned more than one aspect.

### 1.1.1 Perceived importance of the QAA

Nearly one third of respondents asserted that the QAA was important in increasing awareness of good teaching because it would force them to think hard about their practice. It thus helped respondents find faults in their teaching, especially when the respondents were research-focused. A male lecturer in an engineering department described the importance of the QAA as keeping academics on their toes to provide good teaching:

*I think it has made people ... think about their teaching.... And it would be naïve to say that ... everything was perfect, because I don't think it was. ...I think it keeps you on your toe, if you like. ... And I don't see anything wrong with that..., and I think it is a good idea. ... I don't think we are in the business of teaching our students, we are in the business of asking the students to learn from us,... and that is quite important distinction, but at the same time, ... we should make sure ... that the lecture we give all the way ... and we present the material as good as it can be. (Respondent 27)*

What respondent 27 suggested was that the QAA had made academics become more careful about what they taught. Similarly, fifteen other respondents asserted that the QAA was important in providing an outside view on programmes and honest suggestions to academics as a whole. For example, a female lecturer strongly argued for the importance of the QAA in providing academics with external views:

*Err, ... I think, we need it easy ... for university ... and people and perhaps, ... for people in the department, looking inwards ... somebody coming from outside ... look at the programme, and may see things we can't see ...*

*ourselves. ... I think it is essential. (Respondent 23)*

A female teaching fellow in a social science school shared a similar view and perceived the QAA as important in providing suggestions to academics as a whole:

*Yes, because they (QAA) are independent body... that can give you some ... honest ... opinion, and advice and information...about your work. It doesn't intend to do it ... for individual. It tends to do it, the teaching group, as a whole. (Respondent 48)*

Together with the perceived importance of the QAA in providing external views to academics as a whole, 9 respondents argued that the QAA was important because it enabled comparison of standards between universities. For example, a male lecturer's response illustrated this view:

*Well, it is important and we are all subject to ... peer review... from outside, rather than being internally regulated, so it gives... some sort of ... standardization between different universities, so you can compare to ... similar faculties and departments ... in different universities. (Respondent 36)*

Except for the perceived comparison of standards by the QAA, the fourth reason why respondents regarded the QAA as important was that its audit results could help future students to choose their university because good audit results would make the audited university well known to the public, including the students.

### **1.1.2 Perceived limitation of the QAA**

In spite of the argument above that the QAA was important, the majority of respondents viewed the ability of the QAA to improve the quality of teaching within the case study university as limited. One perception among a quarter of respondents was that the QAA set such big agendas that it had become unrealistic about what it could achieve. One example is that the QAA requested universities to meet the requirement of its Code of Practice, but it ignored the fact that every university was different, so that the extent to which the university conformed to the Code was also

different.

Another reason for the respondents' suspicion of the ability of the QAA in improving the quality of teaching was that its Institutional Audit was normally perceived as a fault finding exercise among academics, so audited academics, departments/schools, and universities were likely to conceal their mistakes and problems when audit occurred, which, as a result, limited the ability of the QAA to improve the quality of teaching. This perception, in the view of Power (1994; 1997), is that audit is a form of impression management because it focuses on files and checklists, therefore the institutionalized pressures exist for audit and inspection systems produce comfort and reassurance, rather than critique. Ten respondents in my case study university adopted defensive attitudes towards the QAA audit and perceived it as an event to get through. For example, a head of school of a science related course described the QAA audit process as jumping through a hoop:

*... If you will, it is a hoop to jump through the war to get over. It is not something that you would say that fantastic, and they come and run, ... so the school is forced into a defensive position when they come to the quality assurance. (Respondent 15)*

What respondent 15 suggested was that it was hard for the QAA Institutional Audit to achieve satisfactory results because academics saw the process as about impression management. A female respondent with responsibility for quality assurance jobs shared a similar view and showed her concern that the inability of the audit to capture the normal working practice of academics might cause big problems in the end:

*The audit process itself, generally itself with QAA, or any other audit process, is very negative and it doesn't work. It makes differences and put it off the idea of quality assurance, because it makes them difficult. To be compliant to an audit, we have to do this and I have to do that. I don't see it is relevant.... If it wasn't quite such an aggressive approach, audit always work. I know the reasons behind it, but I think more people actually respond to it and be more willing to say: 'I have to shut it up under the carpet. We have got some problem and we don't tell you about it because it is something internal'. That sort of thing doesn't get done and when someone picks it up, by the time it will be a huge*

*problem. (Respondent 7)*

Aside from the concern that the QAA audit was really about impression management, the third reason for respondents' suspicion of the ability of the QAA to improve the quality of teaching was because a lot of respondents did not perceive the QAA assessors as peers. A manager-academic respondent explained that academics normally associated peer assessors of the QAA with those who could not do well in their academic career:

*Actually, why would someone choose to be a QAA assessor? In some cases, it would seem to be that they would really not be going somewhere with their academic career, so this is sort of a side line. They won't go to the top researcher, so they become a QAA assessor instead. It may be unfair but it was the perception. It was the sense that we were not been judged by ... people ... we would think of our peers, but judged either of the research centered university or people from another research-insensitive university, who would appreciate the particular issues to the particular programmes. We could be judged by people from sort of less research led universities. ... You know, it is one of the reasons many of my whole colleagues are unhappy with the whole process. You know, people are judging. It is supposed to be. There are peers and we can feel safe with their judgements. And actually was the opposite. Anyhow there are plenty of anecdotes of unprofessional behaviour.... (Respondent 5)*

It is obvious that respondent 5 had a strong prejudice against QAA assessors and regarded them as unprofessional. This prejudice helps to explain why respondents in general tended to treat the QAA as related to 'paper work' rather than as assuring real quality. Except for the perception that the QAA assessors were not professional, about one third of respondents in the case study institution argued against the large amount of time and money spent in preparing for the QAA audit, because the audit had not produced much of a positive result but caused heavy burdens for academics. For example, a respondent with responsibilities for quality assurance work in a social science department was very critical of the administrative burden caused by the QAA:

*I am not opposed to QAA, I think how it functions ... can be extremely burdensome ... and actually ironically, I think it can ... be anti- quality assurance, because if we have spent the amount of time ... we could also be*

*sitting around, we could spend this time preparing for our classes instead. And we do it more ... and more ... through the STUPID paper forms ... that nobody is going to look at. ... You know, it is just the admin, rather than sharing best practice, very hard get ... sharing best practice....(Respondent 45)*

What respondent 45 argued for was that academics' time spent in preparing for the QAA could be used for improving teaching, which suggests that respondents perceived the QAA audit as unrelated to bringing about real benefits for the improvement of practice. This lends further support to the view that the QAA Institutional Audit is perceived as a kind of impression management among a quarter of respondents.

## **1.2 Lack of perceived impact of Institutional Audit on the work of academics**

Together with the argument that the QAA Institutional Audit was impression management of the work of respondents, there is evidence that the majority of respondents did not perceive the impact of the audit on their undergraduate classroom teaching practice and curriculum as significant. One perception was that the 'light touch' approach of Institutional Audit did not check teaching and the curriculum, so the audit had achieved little impact on these areas of actual practice. However, Subject Review, which happened before Institutional Audit was introduced, was perceived to have achieved great impact on the work of academics. One reason is that the respondents perceived Subject Review as a tight control over the work of academics as well as the higher education sector to look at a variety of issues, such as whether curriculum, resources, the pastoral care system, student teaching and learning, and the quality assurance mechanisms were in place. The tight control of Subject Review made respondents feel that it looked at their work and made them get involved in the assessment process, so respondents found Subject Review had achieved some impact on their work.



In contrast, respondents, in general, felt more relaxed about Institutional Audit when compared with Subject Review because they did not worry about being chosen to be assessed in this newer methodology. Although the Discipline Audit Trails (DATs) in the Institutional Audit in early 2000s were intended to look at the work of individual departments/schools, the use of trails had now been discontinued. Academics no longer needed to worry about being chosen and getting involved with the process of Institutional Audit. The end of DATs had resulted in respondents feeling less concern for or interest in Institutional Audit. However, Institutional Audit did mean that academics would be monitored and necessitated a degree of mental preparation. Even so, academics found it easier to ignore Institutional Audit. As a result, Institutional Audit did not actually reveal very much about how things were working in the case study university. Therefore there was a perception that the light touch of Institutional Audit produced minimal impact on the work of academics, in spite of the fact that most respondents preferred Institutional Audit to Subject Review because Institutional Audit had reduced their workload.

Another reason for the perceived lack of impact of Institutional Audit on the work of respondents was because most respondents regarded Subject Review and Institutional Audit as a continuous long term process. The perceived impact of Subject Review was, by comparison, much greater although respondents found it hard to tell whether changes that had occurred were produced by Subject Review or by Institutional Audit.

The interview data indicates that the third reason why Institutional Audit was perceived to have had limited impact on the work of academics was because about one fifth of respondents confused Institutional Audit with the internal review carried out by the case study university. There is an indication that respondents found it hard to distinguish the impact of Institutional Audit from that of the university internal review. For example, a deputy head of school in a social science department expressed his difficulty in distinguishing Departmental review from Institutional

Audit:

*Err, (long pause), I think it is really hard to reach a judgment on that, because ... we had Subject Review in 2000, Departmental Review in 2005. You know, in a sense, it is a whole long going process and I think the most important of this is the Departmental Review and Institutional Audit came early and I can't distinguish these two in my mind. (Respondent 14)*

The above examples suggest that Institutional Audit of the QAA was perceived to have achieved little effect on the work of respondents. In order to explore the reasons for this lack of impact, I studied the code of practice of the QAA, which informs the Institutional Audit process, and relates closely to programme specification and subject benchmarking statements. The impact of these codes of practice on the work of academics is analyzed below.

### **1.3 Impact of programme specification on the work of academics**

According to the QAA (2006b), programme specification is a description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. The QAA believes that the specification can help to make sure that designers of programmes are clear about the intended learning outcomes. However, the case study reveals that the majority of respondents perceived writing programme specifications as an artificial exercise and felt that this document was not a completely true reflection of what the programme was actually about. There was little evidence that the specification had had a great effect on respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice and curriculum because the specification only described what respondents already did in a slightly different form.

Eleven respondents argued against the transferable skills required by the specification because they felt confused about what transferable skills were. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of arts was

critical of the transferable skills requirement and cast doubts on the appropriateness of these skills:

*The programme specification designed the form and emphasized the transferable skills. There is quite a debate within arts and humanities about how far we should be focusing on transferable skill, how far is our real job to teach. They developed a lot of extra skills. ... They do that but the argument is it is not our job to teach those skills, but it is still in the programme specification because what we do is to talk about the transferable skills and going to details. In some cases, it is slightly artificial. ... (Respondent 5)*

What respondent 5 implied was that he and his colleagues did not consider teaching transferable skills as part of their jobs. Aside from the confusion about what transferable skills were, respondents were also sceptical of whom the specification was for. According to the QAA, the specification was expected to be useful to academics and students because it would make academics become clearer about their teaching aims and it would help students to choose their courses. However, the view of most respondents in the case study university was that programme specification was neither useful to academics nor to prospective students. A senior administrator in academic staff development articulated that the real effect of programme specification was to enable the university to bring together information that was previously dispersed:

*Originally programme specification was intended to be useful to students. And I don't think they really fulfilled that role. They are useful in programme approval and validation, but I don't think they are particularly helpful for students, just departments give students much more detail about their programme. They are potentially useful to perspective students, parents and teachers, and we have to publish them on our website.... (Respondent 53)*

Respondent 53 suggests that programme specifications did not fulfil their purpose in being useful to students. A further analysis of the interview data indicates that although the specification was intended to be useful to academics, it turned out that respondents who were not programme directors knew little about the specification because they were not required to write them. Moreover, there is little indication that most programme directors took the specification seriously, for example, five of them

considered writing the specification as an administrative burden. This suggests that programme specifications fail to fulfil their original intended purposes, and that respondents in general were not interested in the specification. According to a head of school of an engineering department, academics' lack of interest in programme specification was because the specification involved a lot of paper work:

*The programme specification required by the university is played at the bottom because they generally generating enormous amount of paper work and nobody read it. (Respondent 12)*

Although programme specifications were not popular among most respondents, four manager-academic respondents emphasized the importance of the specification. One of their arguments was that the specification forced academics to think about the content of programmes, and it highlighted areas which were important and interesting. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of social science argued for the importance of the specification:

*I think it is a useful exercise.... You look at the programme as a whole and say does this fit for this? Is it logical? And now the whole things thinking about the learning outcomes for most people have become what you now do, but five or six years ago it was completely impossible. It is useful in making people start from what we want students knowing. (Respondent 1)*

What respondent 1 implied was that programme specifications could make academics think more about students' learning outcomes. The interview data suggests that another perceived usefulness of the specification was that it made the curriculum coherent because when academics wrote the specification, they would think about how things came through the specification and how they should teach students. This view was shared by a couple of other respondents. In contrast, from most respondents' perspective, programme specification had no impact on the curriculum because it was built on curriculum. For example, a female programme director in a medical related course explained the relationship between the specification and the curriculum in the following terms:

*(Long pause) I think the way it worked in practice is people delivered the curriculum they want. And the programme specification is written ... to ... fit.*

*Sorry, I don't think it would really affect ... the curriculum. (Respondent 44)*

Respondent 44 implied that the curriculum came before the specification, so the specification could not affect the curriculum. This view was shared by the majority of respondents. After analysis of the programme specification, the section below looks at how subject benchmarking statements (SBSs) have affected the work of respondents because the SBSs together with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, programme specifications, and the QAA code of practice are a means of making explicit the nature and level of academic standards in English higher education (QAA, 2006b).

#### **1.4 Impact of subject benchmarking statements (SBSs)**

According to the QAA, all the national SBSs were written by groups of academics and other specialists from the relevant subject area. Although the QAA expected the individual academics to know about the SBSs, very few academic respondents in the case study university showed interest in knowing about the SBSs. Instead the majority of academic respondents perceived the SBSs as useful mainly to external examiners and to people who developed new programmes, and useful in programme validation and approval.

However, manager-academics tended to show more interest in the SBSs and to have more knowledge of them than the academic respondents. This suggests that respondents' interest in the SBSs could be influenced by their level of seniority or position. For example, a senior administrator in academic staff development explained that it was because the manager-academic respondents would engage more with the SBSs than their academic colleagues:

*I think, if you become a programme director, or if you have a faculty role, then sometimes you might need to look at them, but I would think, not necessarily. Although I work with the Academic Infrastructure all the time, I don't expect academics to engage with it. (Respondent 53)*

What respondent 53 implied was that the SBSs were not perceived as closely related to the work of academic respondents, so these respondents would ignore it easily. Respondents' lack of knowledge of and interest in the SBSs helps to explain why the impact of the SBSs on the work of academics was very limited.

To conclude, section two reveals that respondents in general held mixed attitudes towards the QAA; and Institutional Audit, programme specification and subject benchmarking statements were perceived to have produced little impact on their work. However, the code of practice of the QAA suggests there are some other quality assurance mechanisms to assure the quality of teaching in the universities, for example, external examining, so section three is going to explore how respondents perceived the impact of external examining on their work.

### **Section two: The external examining system**

According to Silver (1995), the external examining system is a major feature of higher education in the UK and a key mechanism to ensure that standards are maintained and comparable across higher education. Similarly, most respondents in the case study university perceived external examining as important in being part of their peer review system. These respondents held a perception that external examining was different from the QAA because of two main reasons. One is that the external examining system has a longer history than the QAA. The origin of external examining can be traced back to 1832, while the QAA was only set up in 1997. The longer history distinguished external examining from the QAA, so the majority of respondents perceived external examining as separate entities, instead of as part of the QAA, although the QAA includes external examining system as part of its code of practice. The other reason is that the external examining system is about review by peers while Institutional Audit was felt to involve academics for whom respondents

had less respect and regarded as less relevant or credible in evaluating their teaching practice.

## **2.1 Respondents' preference for external examining**

Except for the perceived difference between external examining and the QAA, the majority of respondents in the case study university preferred external examining to the QAA. The main reason for this is that they perceived external examiners as subject specialists in the subject examined, so the respondents felt very confident with the suggestion of examiners for the further development and improvement of practice. In contrast, although the QAA used some subject specialists in its Institutional Audit, there were also people on the audit team who were not subject specialists, so there was a worry among respondents that non-specialists were examining specialist teaching. The second reason for respondents' preference for external examining was that the examiners were fellow academics, so respondents knew more about these examiners because they worked in the same subject fields. As a result, respondents felt more comfortable with the examiners' suggestion. For example, a female manager-academic respondent in a science department explained that there was an intimate relationship between external examiners and academics:

*We tend to know ... the external examiners.... they know us and ... they know the discipline, so it is kind of genuine intellectual engagement, rather than engagement that is more about ... the bureaucratic requirement of one sort or another. ... (Respondent 46)*

Respondent 40 implied that external examiners had a great value to academics because the examiners were directly dealing with what academics did. In contrast, respondents perceived the QAA as slightly distant from them, partly because the QAA liked to pronounce on how academics should do things, which had made respondents become a bit defensive toward the QAA. For example, a quarter of respondents expressed the perception that the QAA process was a 'snapshot'. A

female teaching fellow in a science department made this view explicit:

*I think I would generally prefer the external examining... because external examiner gets closer ... to ... that particular department, and what ... they delivering. ... They see over a long period of time. ... and there is a continuity for three years or four years ... while, QAA just come in as a snapshot.... (Respondent 47)*

Respondent 47 showed a preference for external examining and perceived the process of external examining as about a continuing relationship with an individual but treated the QAA process as an event to be tolerated. This confirms that respondents regarded the QAA as more distant than external examiners. Except for the perceived snapshot process of the QAA, it was felt that there were less time demands in preparing for external examining. This was the third reason for respondents' preference of external examining. For example, a male professor in an engineering department implied that dealing with the QAA was comparatively more time consuming than external examining:

*Because it (external examining) is a very low ... impact activity. It happens ... once or twice a year. It is valuable ... and it takes zero amount of my time ... to prepare for them, additional time... Of course, I have external exam preparation, but there is no additional time.... The examiner is not going to expect me to pay a whole documentation preparation to ... read over above what I am already doing, so specifically very low impact, compared to that ... very high impact ... on physical time that QAA requires. (Respondent 39)*

The above comment indicates that the majority of respondents found external examining more important than the QAA. This confirms that respondents accepted external examining as a legitimate element of self-regulation as well as a traditional way to maintain and to compare the academic standards of undergraduate degrees and the quality of teaching, in spite of the fact that the external examining system has both benefits and problems which will be analyzed below.



## 2.2 Perceived benefits of external examining

The interview data suggests that the most widely accepted view among respondents was that external examiners came from outside the university, so they provided an external view of what was going on, and they could spot faults in the work of academics more easily than academics working in the reviewed department. About one fifth of respondents, particularly the respondents in their early career, regarded external examining as a way to legitimize what they did because it could assure them that what they did was fair. This was also perceived as confidence inspiring because when external examiners were happy with what they were doing it meant a kind of approval of their work, which as a result would give respondents confidence in their teaching.

Except for the confidence inspiring function, respondents perceived external examining as useful in the following three ways: providing insight into teaching and assessment; making suggestions which enabled departments to reflect; and keeping respondents in contact with academics in different universities. For example, a female lecturer in an art department argued for the importance of external examining, particularly in its role assuring the quality of programmes:

*I think it is very useful system ... particularly for ... professional programme. It is an important external view of ... what is happening.... It is the most important quality assurance aspect ... of the programme. And their comment is taken ... very seriously. They identify the problems which is not clear ... to the inside. They identify the weakness of student understanding ... etc. Their comments tend to be taken very seriously ... by the department, so they are more likely to have a ... big impact. (Respondent 32)*

A female lecturer in a medical related course shared a similar view and regarded external examining as a useful method:

*Pros: good method of ensuring fairness of marking, examinations etc. Good for academics to have feedback from someone outside the University, reassuring for students to know that the system is in place to ensure fairness, appropriate standards, etc. (Respondent 25)*

What respondent 32 and respondent 25 implied was that external examining was perceived as an important element of peer review and as a way of benchmarking their standards against other institutions. Together with the perceived benefits of external examining, an analysis of the interview data indicates that there were also problems with the system.

### **2.3 Perceived problems with external examining**

The main perceived problems with external examining among respondents were: examiners received too low a payment but a heavy workload; some examiners knew little of the reviewed department, so their comments were lacking in objectivity; the quality of external examiners varied; and it was difficult for external examiners to compare standards across the institutions. It is important to point out that although a lot of respondents were critical of the external examining system, none of these respondents denied the fact that external examining was important and useful to their work.

#### **2.3.1 Low payment and heavy workload of examiners**

The most frequently raised concern among respondents was that external examiners were paid little but their workload was heavy. This finding was similar with the argument of Hannan & Silver (2006) that external examiners had little pay and often received little or no support from their own institution for taking on examining activities. Nearly one third of respondents in the case study university showed a concern about the difficulties of getting good examiners if the university was unwilling to spend more time and money in supporting the external examining system. For example, respondent 59 was unique among those I interviewed in the extent of his criticism of the low payment of external examiners. He regarded this as an insult to academics:

*Well, ok, as an external examiner, ... you are not paid enough. In fact, the payment is such insult ... that you don't spend time doing it. ... (Respondent 59)*

Respondent 59's criticism of the external examining system was based on his personal experience. On a couple of occasions, this respondent refused to take on external examiner jobs because he felt that his work was not recognized by the low pay. The view that the pay for external examining was too low was shared by nearly half of the other respondents. For example, a manager-academic argued against paying external examiners so little. He was concerned that this would prevent good academics from becoming external examiners:

*I dislike the fact that we cannot pay the examiners more and I dislike the fact that people university wants are the most distinguished academics, but sometimes they are very busy, so you end up with people you perhaps are less happy with. (Respondent 4)*

Respondent 4 was worried that it might be difficult to obtain good examiners in the future. Together with the issue of low payment, the heavy workload of external examining was a concern of ten respondents. For example, a manager-academic confirmed that the workload of external examiners was heavy. He showed sympathy for this situation:

*The major problem is there is so much work. The integrity of the system rests on a small number of people doing an enormous amount of work. And they are being asked to do more and we can see why the university has introduced the reporting forms to try to get the external to give more comment and to give the right sorts of comments, but it is an extra burden on external examiners. And we get comments from a number of our different departments and they really resent this. Why do they have to do the extra stuff? Why do they have to try to fill in the form which isn't always helpful for them? (Respondent 5)*

Respondent 5 found that the job of external examining had become bureaucratically driven and blamed the case study university for the increased paper work. However, an analysis of the QAA documents reveals that paper work related to external examining might be due to the fact that external examining was included in the Code of Practice by the QAA, which has made external examining become a quality

assurance mechanism, so the university has to make sure that these requirements are adhered to. As a result, it produces more form filling, which made respondents perceive the workload of being an examiner as heavier. This finding is similar to that of Hannan & Silver (2006) that the increased bureaucratisation or formalisation of external examining was not accepted by academics and that it could reduce academics' motivation for undertaking the role of an examiner.

### **2.3.2 Examiners' lack of knowledge of reviewed department**

Except for the perceived low payment and heavy workload of external examiners, the second frequently raised concern among respondents was that external examiners did not spend much time looking at the work of the reviewed department/school because they only stayed in the reviewed department/school a short time of period, often one day per year. For example, eighteen respondents cast doubts on external examiners' knowledge of the reviewed department/school. A male respondent doing a quality assurance job in a science department expressed his suspicion of the quality of the work of his examiners because they spent so little time examining students' work in his department/school:

*The other thing is ...external examiners...are just here ... for a couple of days or so.... They read sample of scripts ... and they see small group of students.... At the moment, it is very difficult for them, there is a small set of information and ... very small window ... on the department ... they visit ... to make ... dramatic changes ... over how we should be ... doing things. It is very difficult ... to read a few scripts to say: ' your marking system is completely wrong. You are being far too generous, or far too severe... for students and you need to be adding... 10% mark... and 20% mark ... to everybody to ... get up to ... acceptable standards.' That is a dramatic, very difficult thing for external examiner to do..., even if he or she may feel ... that the department is absolutely... a bit generous ... a little bit severe... over marking, (pause) so they are making ... fairly minor recommendations. (Respondent 63)*

It is evident that respondent 63 did not consider the comments made by the external examiners as convincing because they did not spend much time learning about the

department/school. Similarly, six other respondents expressed their doubts about the objectivity of examiners' comments about the reviewed department/school because they found a lot of departments in the case study university liked to choose their academic friends to be external examiners. One respondent described it as sort of human instinct to ask people whom they knew well and who they felt were sympathetic to their perspective. These six respondents expressed their worry that the departments might make the wrong choice because the people the department knew well might not be necessarily an appropriate or professional choice. For example, a male respondent doing quality assurance in a science department showed his concern that using an examiner lacking in the right qualifications would increase the workload of the reviewed department:

*If you picked up someone ... who is not very good ... and you can decide with them ... and some of them do have idiot criticism .... They want you to do things. ... You have to ... formally respond to ... and you wish ... they keep their mouth ... shut about .... It is not that you hide something, just that ... you think that they are wrong. (Respondent 60)*

What respondent 60 implied that some external examiners might not be necessarily that well qualified to undertake the role. This suggests that the quality of external examiners in the case study university was perceived as varied.

### **2.3.3 Variable quality of external examiners**

An analysis of the interview data reveals that about one sixth of respondents found the quality of their examiners varied. One example is that these examiners did not think broadly when they made suggestions to the reviewed department/school. For example, a head of school of a medical related course revealed that some external examiners did not understand what they were supposed to do:

*The cons are that, err... the external examiners do not always understand what it is they are supposed to do, so they come up with spare suggestions. The problem is that the area they haven't read it brief, so they get a balcony of information from the university, never looked at it, and the feedback they give through the form is sometimes inappropriate. (Respondent 13)*

Respondent 13 questioned the ability of the external examiners in general, and perceived the quality of external examiners as poor. Twelve other respondents shared a similar view and expressed their concern that since the quality of external examiners varied, it was important to make the external examining process more valid. Otherwise, it would become little more than a box ticking exercise. However, Hannan & Silver (2006) reveal that academics are generally resistant to attempts to make external examining more formal in function and they oppose attempts to impose a national system of training. This suggests that how to make the external examining process satisfactory is a debate as well as a long standing process among academics.

#### **2.3.4 Difficulty in comparing standards across institutions**

Except for the suspicion of respondents about the quality of external examiners, ten respondents cast doubts on the feasibility of external examining comparing standards across institutions. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of arts argued that it was not possible for external examiners to compare standards across institutions:

*The system (external examining) is supposed to mean every degree in each institution is the same. Everybody knows that it is not true.... (Respondent 5)*

Among the ten respondents who doubted the comparability, there was a perception that although external examining was expected to compare standards at the subject level, it was actually used to provide assurance for students, funding councils and higher education institutions. For example, a male respondent doing a quality assurance job in a science department made this view explicit:

*Err, (long pause) I think, you have to have, some sort of... comparison... between ... those at the subject level .... Provide reassurance, ... for students... and for those to ... fund them and for their families as well... that ... standards are similar..., but there are two ... obvious ... weaknesses. That is ... that universities ... tend to draw ... their external examiner ... from other*

*universities that they know... are fairly ... similar to themselves, so... there isn't great ability ... for the external examiner ... to say: 'you need to change ... what you are doing... because they come and start with ... very similar sorts of institutions. (Respondent 63)*

What respondent 63 implied was that he and his colleagues doubted the ability of external examiners to be able to perform their traditional role in comparing standards across institutions. Instead they were beginning to perceive external examining as a quality assurance mechanism used to assure the public that the university was providing good quality teaching to students.

#### **2.4 Effect of external examining on the work of academics**

In spite of the above arguments that the external examining had disadvantages, there is evidence that the examining system was perceived as useful in a variety of ways, such as checking and giving suggestions on exam papers, giving academics feedback to develop programmes, making recommendations for the way teaching practices or courses could be modified, pointing out things about procedures, rules, and the content of the course, and providing suggestions on degree assessment. It is evident that the perceived usefulness is related to checking examination papers and examination procedures. However, there was little evidence that external examining was perceived to have improved respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice and curriculum partly because of the fact that external examiners in general liked to assure academics that they already doing a satisfactory job, instead of making criticisms of their work. For example, a head of school in an arts department confirmed this view and revealed that the effect of external examining mainly fell on examinations:

*... It (external examining) affected the individual exam outcome and so forth. As to the work of academics and curriculum, it has little bit, but it could do more, because mainly it is satisfactory with what we are doing. There is something potential of being affective for changing what we do. (Respondent 11)*

In spite of the limited impact of external examining in making recommendations on examinations and assessments, most respondents showed support for this system because they perceived external examining as providing them with an external perspective. A couple of respondents described external examining as keeping academics 'on their toes'. A male professor in an engineering department for example, strongly argued in favour of the value of external examining:

*I think the external examiner do play a valuable role, just ... to keep people on their toes ... to make sure that we do expect that. The external examiner board meetings will... give an overview of the course, and say: 'in this course field, this is and ...' I look at the marking and say this course didn't do well and... the last year hasn't do well, what are you doing to increase that?. (pause) So they can keep people on their toes about things. (Respondent 39)*

It is worth pointing out that in the analysis of the external examining system, respondents' experience as external examiners were taken into consideration. 10 out of 64 respondents had got external examiner experience, but there is little evidence that their experience had greatly influenced their perception of the external examining system. Only 5 of these 10 respondents asserted that they learned something useful from being external examiners, such as, bringing back examples of good practice in another institution, getting good teaching ideas and assessment ideas. The other 5 respondents expressed that they did not gain a great deal from being an external examiner. However, a lot of respondents showed strong interest in being external examiners because it was perceived as a mark of esteem and it would contribute to their career development. This is similar to the finding of Hannan & Silver (2006) that academics are motivated to be external examiners because taking on this role is perceived as part of professional or career development.

To conclude, section 3 reveals that external examining was perceived as a useful supportive system but with space to be improved. Except for external examining, the National Student Survey (NSS) is used as another external quality assurance mechanism to assure the quality of teaching in the case study university. The section below analyzes how the 2005 NSS had affected the work of respondents.



### **Section three: The 2005 National Student Survey (NSS)**

The NSS is a national initiative across all publicly-funded higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It began in 2005 and analyses subject and programme level data from final year undergraduates. According to HEFCE (2006a), the NSS aims to gather feedback on the quality of students' courses, helps inform the choices of future applicants to higher education, and contributes to public accountability. Results from the NSS are regarded by the HEFCE as an essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education. *This section first explores how much respondents in the case study university knew about this survey and then analyzes whether this survey was believed to have affected the work of respondents.*

#### **3.1 Respondents' knowledge of NSS**

The interview data suggests that the majority of academic respondents below the level of department/school management knew little about the survey, but the head of school/department, and people in charge of undergraduate studies within the faculties, and directors of quality assurance at the faculty level were keenly aware of this survey. Although there was some feedback to front-line academic staff through the system of annual programme review where the results of the NSS were taken into account, respondents in general found it very hard to learn anything from the survey. Academic respondents' lack of knowledge of the NSS was different from the expectation of senior manager-academics that departments/schools would take the survey seriously. For example, a senior administrator responsible for academic staff development in the case study university expressed her shock after learning that a department/school within my sample did not take the survey seriously because she had sent every department/school a copy of the survey results, including data with students' comments.

The main reason why the survey was not taken seriously by departments/schools was that nearly half of respondents had no interest in the survey because their department/school had their own student course evaluation instruments in place which were perceived as more closely related to their teaching. For example, a head of school confirmed that he only circulated the survey result, but did not discuss it in his department because no one showed interest in it:

*I think I circulated the results by email ... and we didn't discuss the outcome. I just reported and I didn't discuss it with my colleagues. I didn't think they would be interested. (laughter) (Respondent 11)*

What respondent 11 implied was that the NSS was not perceived as closely related with the courses that individual academics taught although it might be more relevant to the institution as a whole. Here, the relevant point is if the university was seen to do badly in the survey, it would affect its recruitment. Seven other respondents shared a similar view and perceived the NSS as more about how the departments organized the tutorial system to give proper development to students and how departments organized the provision of feedback. For example, a head of school made this view explicit:

*Err,... I don't think it will affect teaching. I think it will affect organization. It will improve organization and specifically the issues are around organizations. The teaching itself is not a fault. And the content of the course is not an issue. It is people turning up on time and students understanding what is happening in the timetable, these kinds of organization issues are the main problems. (Respondent 13)*

The view that the NSS was mainly for the institutional system suggests that it was considered as distant from the real work of individual academic teaching, which as a result made academics show little interest in it. Therefore it is hard to tell whether the NSS can fulfill its purpose in informing the choices of future applicants to higher education or not.

### **3.2 Perceived impact of NSS on work of respondents**

The interview data suggests that the majority of respondents not only had little knowledge of the NSS but perceived the impact of the survey on the curriculum and their undergraduate classroom teaching practice as limited because they perceived the NSS as distant from their individual teaching. Many respondents asserted that the survey would not make them take teaching more seriously in future if its methods remained flawed because teaching could only be affected by the individual quality of academics, the internal standards of the department, student feedback, and peer review.

Although the NSS in general was perceived as having little impact on undergraduate classroom teaching practice, five manager-academics argued that the NSS had the potential to influence undergraduate classroom teaching practice in the future. One argument is that the NSS could encourage universities to request new lecturers to take training courses which, as a result, would influence academics' teaching. The other argument was that the NSS would make academic respondents become more careful with evaluation of their courses to make sure that they did well in their evaluations, which as a result would improve respondents' teaching.

A further analysis of the interview data suggests that most respondents did not think the NSS would change the power relations between academics and students. However, a couple of respondents argued that the survey had the potential to make the relationship between academics and students more formal, particularly in terms of the regularity of meetings and consistency of what was delivered in the tutorials.

### **3.3 Perceived flawed methods of NSS**

The interview data suggests that the perceived limited impact of the NSS on the work of respondents was related to flawed methodology of the survey. The majority of

respondents were critical of the way the survey was organized, the way it was run and the poor quality of data it collected. Many respondents perceived the sample as very small when the survey result was broken down at the programme level. They argued that the small sample size made it hard for them to tell whether the result was statistically significant or not. For example, a male respondent in a science department argued against the low response rate of the survey:

*Generally speaking, ... the survey is not useful, (pause) because the response rate is ... so low, and also, ... one of the problems ... we had at the discipline ..., so at the macro level, the result of the student survey isn't very useful to us. (Respondent 54)*

Another criticism of the NSS was that some questions in the survey were too generic to identify problems in the courses. For example, a head of school in a medical related course illustrated that the survey questions were inappropriate:

*This survey comes back with really damning criticism. One has to remember that the NSS there are a number of problems with it. One thing is the questions are not ideal. ... You know you are inviting to answer it, so that is wrong, so there is a problem of the survey. Another issue is there is a small percentage of class involved in the survey and how accurate is the information survey going to bring back. (Respondent 13)*

The perceived flaws in the survey had caused respondents to question the validity of the survey results. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of arts expressed doubts about the validity of the NSS:

*... I think (long pause), I think there are a lot of problems with the way the NSS was carried out. There are a lot of uncertainties of whether the results are reliable, or what they actually mean. In some cases, the result is quite out of step with other evidence, so I think if we get the second year result. They are basically the same, then we might have a bit more confidence in them and start to think about how to respond. (Respondent 5)*

What respondent 5 implied was that respondents were sceptical of the methods of the survey, so they did not accept its data as valid. The interview data suggests that another reason for many respondents' suspicion of the validity of the NSS was because the data from the survey did not always relate to just one department.

Sometimes it was for two different departments, which made it difficult for respondents to distinguish their department's result from that of another department. For example, a deputy head of school in a social science department argued that he found it difficult to distinguish the results of two different departments:

*Well, the reason is that ...they didn't distinguish between the two degrees. The whole thing is so flawed and it can go to the bin as I am concerned. ... If I am an economic and politics students, I might think that the feedback in economics is just fantastic, but politics isn't so good, but they say taking your programme as a whole, I might say: 'well, I will balance it out.' that would be uninformative, so flawed, it would be no use, because all it tells me is students make cumbersome judgements between the two departments.... (Respondent 14)*

The above examples suggest that respondents in general were critical of the survey which they regarded as flawed. This accounts for why the impact of the NSS on the work of academics was perceived as limited. Other than the NSS, the QAA, and the external examining system, the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) were studied because the case study university offers some vocationally orientated degrees which engage with a wide range of PSRBs to accredit the curriculum.

#### **Section four: Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)**

The interview data found that of the seven departments/schools in the research sample three vocationally oriented awards existed. For reasons of anonymity, the names of these professional bodies are concealed, but their impact on the curriculum and on respondents' undergraduate teaching will be analyzed below.

##### **4.1 Perceived effect of PSRB on curriculum and teaching**

Nearly all the respondents whose courses offered vocationally orientated degrees pointed out that professional bodies had a significant influence on their curriculum and teaching because these bodies told academics what to teach and how they should

assess. In other words, these bodies were perceived as important in providing them with knowledge which controlled the curriculum, so academics had to map the requirement against the criteria of the relevant PSRB. Many respondents used the word 'control' to describe the relationship between their degree and the professional bodies. For example, a head of school and programme director of a computer course illustrated the nature of this control operated by professional bodies:

*(long pause) Well, ... the fact of the British Computer Society, particularly, the professional body generally was, before I arrived at the university is being to put pressures on some specific topics in the curriculum and these tended to be things they saw from the point of view of sort of main use of computers and ... they also put pressure on sort of things they would do with and we would call it transferable skills and the effect of that .... (Respondent 12)*

Respondent 12 felt that the professional bodies exercised considerable control over his degrees. The interview data suggests that although the PSRB was perceived to have a significant influence on curriculum and respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice, there were something that the PSRB respondents disliked about the way they operated.

#### **4.2 Disadvantages of PSRB**

One perceived disadvantage of the professional body was that it duplicated the work of respondents in vocationally related degrees. Five respondents shared this view.

One female lecturer called it a kind of repetition of what they had done:

*Tedious. It duplicated ... a lot of the university work, except on different paper work... you can't just replicate it twice. You have to ... write in different ways, because they are different bodies. (Respondent 20)*

In addition to the perceived duplication of respondent's work, three respondents perceived some PSRB requirements as out of date. For example, a male professor was very critical of his professional body because he regarded some of its requirements as unprofessional:

*You are not going to have a job if you are not accredited by (×). ... What they*

*require for the accreditation ... is ... a huge amount of effort, plus ... a lot of time that they have got their own view of the world.... For example, they think the database is an important subject because ... say the vast majority of people on the panel happened to have a background on that subject ... when they come to the department and see there is no data base and say how could we accredit the scores... see it is rubbish. You know, every department can't teach every course. And you have got to look at teaching whether that provides good standards of education. ... Not pay attention to your favorite subject that is accredited. (pause) That is same thing, when you take people from different background and they have certain expectations. ... And even they meant to be fair, and no one is that fair. (Respondent 39)*

One reason why respondent 39 perceived the requirement of the professional body as outdated was because this is a fast developing subject area. As a result, it might be difficult for the PSRB in question to include all the changes in its specification. The interview data suggests that another perceived disadvantage of the PSRBs among two respondents was that sometimes the requirements from the university and those from the PSRBs were different, which made respondents become confused about what to do. For example, a female lecturer gave an example to illustrate this perceived disadvantage:

*Well, I suppose many professional bodies are very strongly influenced ... at the moment by what they call the voice of the service user. Here we are not talking about students. We are talking about ... clients in social services. Children, families, disabled people, people from minority groups. And ... they want a strong influence on the training. ... and social workers are heavily involved, which may not be ... the university would like. (Pause) it is again, the shift way from ... the theoretical to ... practical (respondent 20)*

What respondent 20 implied was that the specification of the professional bodies would be influenced by their stakeholders. The specification sometimes might be different from what the case study university expected, so the lack of harmonious interaction between universities and the professional bodies confused respondents.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, this chapter has described and analyzed how four external quality assurance mechanisms were perceived to have affected the work of academics. There is some indication that respondents in general held mixed views towards these mechanisms. Take the QAA for example, respondents perceived the QAA as an unwelcome external interference with their work. Most respondents were suspicious of the ability of the QAA to maintain and improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum. However, there was another perception among respondents that the QAA was important in keeping academics on their toes, which as a result would increase their awareness of good teaching because not all such practice was currently good. These mixed views suggest that respondents perceived the QAA as important but with limitations.

The interview data further reveals that respondents held different attitudes towards these external mechanisms. The majority of respondents perceived external examining as important and professional. They preferred external examining to the QAA, in spite of the perceived flaws of the external examining system, such as, the varied quality of external examiners, and the lack of objectivity of some examiners. There were two main reasons for this preference. One was that respondents perceived external examining as peer review. The other reason was that external examining did not increase the workload of most respondents.

There is an indication that although many respondents knew about the QAA, the impact of the QAA Institutional Audit on their work was perceived as insignificant because the retreat of the QAA from Subject Review into Institutional Audit had made them adopt a more relaxed attitude. Most respondents, except for the manager-academic respondents, did not need to get involved in the audit, and they were no longer worried about being chosen in the Institutional Audit, so they showed little interest in it. The interview data also suggests that some respondents showed



resistance to the Institutional Audit itself. The resistance could be related to the QAA abandoning the Subject Review method which was perceived to have significantly increased academics' workload. Therefore the QAA changed its audit methods and moved from Subject Review to Institutional Audit. However, this case study reveals that although Institutional Audit did not increase most respondents' workload as the Subject Review did, many respondents felt free to ignore Institutional Audit because of their lack of involvement in the audit process.

An analysis of the interview data suggests that the NSS was the least well accepted external quality assurance mechanism among respondents. Many respondents knew little of the survey and showed no interest in knowing about it because it was perceived to have flawed methods and because there was a perception that the NSS had nothing to do with individual academics' teaching and was only for use at the institutional level. For example, a negative survey result might affect the university's recruitment. In contrast, the professional bodies were perceived as the most important external quality assurance mechanism because it prescribed teaching content and curriculum where departments/schools had vocationally orientated degrees. There is a perception among respondents that the professional body is important in controlling their curriculum and their undergraduate teaching. This finding suggests that respondents were more likely to feel the impact of the quality assurance mechanisms when the mechanisms got involved with their work.

A further analysis of the interview data suggests that the respondents' position had influenced their knowledge of the quality assurance mechanisms. One example is that manager-academics knew more of the QAA and the NSS than academic respondents. One explanation is that these manager-academics had jobs that might be quality assurance related, so they knew more about these mechanisms. Meanwhile, there is an indication that manager-academics were more likely to emphasize the potential effect of the QAA and the NSS on the work of academics than their academic colleagues. The positive attitude of these manager-academics towards the

QAA and the NSS suggests that when managers were required to help implement these mechanisms, they tended to assure the outsiders that these mechanisms were important and useful.

However, there is little indication that respondents' rank of position had influenced their knowledge of the external examining system because respondents in general perceived it as peer review, and regarded suggestions made by external examiners as professional. This confirms that academics normally regard external examiners as subject specialists (Hannan & Silver, 2006), and perceived the external examining system as an important feature of UK higher education (Silver, 1995). In general respondents' positive perception towards the external quality assurance mechanisms depends on whether these mechanisms were perceived as teaching related or not. If the mechanism was teaching related, respondents were more likely to perceive it as important and useful. Otherwise respondents would perceive the mechanism as distant from their work and showed little interest in it and these mechanisms would be perceived as having little impact on their work.

## **Chapter 9: Perceived Impact of Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms on Work of Academics**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined how external quality assurance mechanisms (EQAMs) were perceived to have affected the work of respondents in the case study university. Together with the external mechanisms, the case study university uses a range of internal quality assurance mechanisms to assure and to enhance the quality and standards of its programmes because one feature of an audit culture is a belief that effective regulation is possible and capable of ‘reaching into the inner motives of target organizations’ (Power, 1997, p. 54). Auditee organizations, Power argues, develop their own internal systems of control. The external audit process concentrates on these controls. Similarly, in the case study university, the learning and teaching committee oversees quality assurance, but the devolved responsibility for assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and programmes is carried out through internal quality assurance mechanisms within the departments/schools and faculties. This chapter thus looks at how these mechanisms have affected the work of academics. The mechanisms examined include student course evaluation, peer observation, annual programme review, and the approval system for new and revised programmes and units. The sequence of these mechanisms in this chapter is arranged according to their perceived importance to the work of respondents which covers undergraduate classroom teaching practice, the development of the curriculum. Power relations between academic and students are also considered.

This chapter first looks at how student course evaluation has changed respondents’ teaching and curriculum practice, revealing how the evaluation has affected the perceived power relations between academics and students. The chapter then explores respondents’ perception of peer observation, aiming to reveal whether the

observation was seen to have improved respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Next, the chapter examines the impact of the annual programme review and approval system for new and revised programmes and units both for undergraduate classroom teaching practice and the formal curriculum. Finally, this chapter concludes with respondents' general perceptions of these internal quality assurance mechanisms, suggesting which mechanism was most widely accepted among respondents, and the reasons for its popularity.

### **Section one: Impact of student course evaluation on teaching**

Student course evaluation in the case study university was normally given at the end of each unit and was collected by academics or support staff. There was not one single form of evaluation that was used in every department. The seven departments/schools in the research sample had slightly different approaches and different forms. For example, two departments were particularly interested in having numerical data which they analyzed after students gave grades for every aspect of the lecturer's performance. They did calculations of the average grade per lecture or per unit. In contrast, the other five departments/schools found the numerical data less helpful and preferred to collect students' qualitative views about the course.

#### **1.1 Drivers of student course evaluation**

In spite of the different attitudes held by departments/schools towards student course evaluation data, respondents in general agreed that the evaluation was taken seriously by their departments/schools and that there were two drivers for this process: quality audit and the promotion system for academics. There is a popular view among respondents that if the university/school wanted to make money from students, they had to design courses that would attract students, especially the international students. One perceived important way to attract students was to publish the audit result which

could give the public, including potential students, an idea of whether the quality of the university they were interested in was good or not. There is an indication that respondents in computer course and in medical related courses were more likely to emphasize the importance of this 'marketisation' of higher education rather than respondents from other subject areas, partly because student application in these two subjects were relatively higher than the other subjects researched. For example, a male teaching fellow in a medical related course emphasized the importance of quality audit:

*Err, ... if the students aren't happy with the course, ... and they are going to say back to other students, the ××× school like each other, wants to get the best students onto the course, ... and there is a lot of money ... to make on the students, so the ... university that tries to play catch up to design the courses, ... the students are going to be interested in.... and keep them happy with. I think there are a lot of students' ... input in the design of the courses.... (Respondent 52)*

Respondent 52 took the needs for students' opinion into consideration with the requirement of quality audit. This view was supported by the majority of respondents who perceived student course evaluation as an important quality assurance mechanism adopted by their departments to demonstrate to anyone external to the institution that they had good teaching quality.

About one third of respondents in different subjects and from different levels of seniority argued that the other driver of student course evaluation was that the evaluation result would influence academics' promotion to some degree, although the promotion is mainly affected by other factors, notably their research performance. For example, a director of undergraduate teaching in a social science related department said that his department used the evaluation to assess lecturers' performance.

*... In this department, some new member of staff arrived and give a series of lectures which are not well received maybe they have been teaching in different countries. What we do is to see the comments and the scores improved over the next couple of years. We have got some very good examples of that. Not*

*dumbing down, not sympathetic ... but dumbing down the way the lecture was delivered. (Respondent 8)*

Respondent 8 associated student evaluation with academic evaluation. This suggests that when the evaluation was perceived to influence academics' promotion, it would make respondents feel pressurised in undertaking the evaluation because they had to spend a lot more time generating paper work to demonstrate that their teaching was good. Therefore respondents felt demoralized and burdened by the evaluation.

## **1.2 Perceived effect of student course evaluation on teaching**

Although respondents in general perceived student course evaluation as quality audit and related to academic promotion, the majority of them regarded the evaluation as a useful practice in improving their undergraduate classroom teaching practice because the evaluation provided them with a way of seeing what students liked and what they disliked. Most respondents asserted that if the students pointed out that an aspect of their teaching was not satisfactory, they would consider whether the student perception was valid or not, and then moderate some aspects of their teaching.

An analysis of the interview data indicates that what respondents found the evaluation most useful for was to force them become clearer in what they were trying to achieve in the unit and to remind them of their shortcomings. As a result they make it clear to the students that what they were delivering would be improved and would take the students' needs and interests into consideration in the process. Forty out of sixty four respondents in different subject areas asserted that they had changed their teaching methods and their teaching content due to student evaluation. What these respondents normally did was to look at what they taught last time and then made changes to this material. One common example of a change mentioned was when a lecturer changed the course textbook which was considered as difficult by students. Four respondents in the faculty of social science articulated that they

changed their textbooks due to student evaluation. For example, a female lecturer made this view explicit:

*I think it is taken quite seriously. The most practical matter, one case that for the unit taught, there is indication that textbook was difficult, ... so I quite agreed with the comments, so I made a change of the textbook. (Respondent 22)*

Respondent 22 further argued that she not only changed her textbook but also changed her way of giving students handouts, for example, she started to give students handout far in advance of her lecture:

*That is the same for the lecture notes.... I always pass to them three days in advance. While... in the past, it would only pass to them ... the day before, or even the morning, before giving the lecture in the afternoon. ... (Respondent 22)*

The interview data reveals that respondents not only gave students handouts in advance, but also began to provide students with more handouts which had become a common practice among the majority of respondents. There is also evidence that the majority of respondents used new technology after the evaluation, such as Powerpoint and Blackboard. For example, a respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of science illustrated that student course evaluation enabled her to use new technology to benefit learning:

*Well, ... I provide a way of much more handout and much more in the way of detailed, set of outlines of each class, right at the beginning of the session and handing them at the beginning of each session, the use of technology and use of Powerpoint and things that totally improves learning. I think Blackboard has grown up as a result of student pressure, but I haven't come to use Blackboard. (Respondent 9)*

Except for the use of new technology, the majority of respondents said they were willing to change their lecture topics to meet the needs of students. For example, a female lecturer in a social science department argued that student course evaluation changed her way to address topics in class:

*... Sometimes, it (student course evaluation) is really useful, for example, students might think of the topic that they ... really like to cover in this course. ... You teach course work on real politics and ... a bunch of students say: 'I really think we should cover this topic and ... we haven't covered that'. ...*

*Oh, we think: 'That is a good topic and ... we could include that, you know', so that kind of thing ... I think is really useful. (Respondent 21)*

The above examples suggest that student course evaluation was perceived as useful in improving the ways respondents presented information and the content of lectures. This confirms that although not all the respondents took much notice of student course evaluation, the evaluation was actually perceived as useful among the majority of respondents and the evaluation had affected respondents' teaching to some degree. This finding corresponds well with the view of Wilson *et al* (1997) that student course evaluation is a valid, reliable and useful indicator of teaching quality because it provides crucial information about the quality of courses. After the analysis of the impact of student course evaluation on teaching, the section below will analyze respondent's perceptions of whether the evaluation had changed the power relationship between academics and students.

### **1.3 Impact of evaluation on power relation between academics and students**

The power relations between academics and students was raised and discussed by Macfarlane (2004a). He argued that academics possess a considerable degree of power over students because of the power of assessment which places academics in a unique position to influence the class of degree a student receives and, often in consequence, their future career prospects. Similar findings appeared in my case study. Two thirds of respondents believed that academics had power over students because academics knew more about the subjects, and because academics were in charge of the teaching content and the marking.

However, respondents held various views on whether student course evaluation had changed the power relations between academics and students. Nearly two thirds of respondents did not think the students' power was strengthened because academics still had the power over students in spite of all the evaluation processes, but they



pointed out that academics were becoming more responsive to the needs of students due to the evaluation, especially in providing more handouts and making changes to their units (see section 2.2 of this chapter). In contrast, the other one third of respondents argued that the power relations between academics and students would change in the future, maybe towards becoming more equal, but the change might take a long time. For example, a senior lecturer in a social science department argued that the relationship between academics and students was changing but slowly:

*Well, I think it (change of power relationship between academic and students) is hard to tell. Over the year, students have more feel about ... what to control what happens. They feel that ... they want to get value for money. And I think we are taking more notice ... of what the students say now than we used to. It is just a long term trend. ... I don't think it makes individual changes. We used to say: 'we know best and we don't need you tell what to do.' and we are in control. ... You do what we tell you. Now, it is quite a long way, ... the other way around. (Respondent 21)*

A further analysis of the interview data reveals that respondents held different attitudes towards this potentially changed power relation. One third of respondents perceived it as important in weeding out bad teaching practices. For example, a female lecturer in an art department argued that academics would feel obliged to improve their teaching due to the pressure of evaluation:

*Err, ... for example, I have seen ... students complaining bitterly ... year on year ... about a certain lecturer, who give terrible lectures. And nothing happened. ... I think in future, they will be able to, say: 'look, something has to happen.' ... I think their view is less likely to be ignored. (Respondent 56)*

However, the other two thirds of respondents argued that if the power relation between academics and students changed in favor of students, it would make academics more accountable and would make students more demanding in terms of their relationship with lecturers through, among other things, lectures, the content of course units, the style of lectures and pastoral care. Nine respondents showed their concern that the potentially changed power relationship would increase 'spoon feeding' to students, which would decrease the quality of education. For example, a senior lecturer in the faculty of arts pointed out that academics had to provide more

handouts because of the evaluation, which is an example of ‘spoon feeding’, and might lead to academics giving higher marks to students:

*... You know, students tend to demand ... lots, lots of handout and reading lists ... and so on. (pause) That may ... or may not be ... a good thing. ... It does mean that ... they tend to become more passive and there is a worry that ... this could be a consequence of ... sort of questionnaire culture ... and the lecturers do more and more ... spoon feeding and get higher marks. ... (Respondent 55)*

Except for the worry about ‘spoon feeding’, there was a fear among eight respondents that the potentially changed power relationship would make academics become less powerful than the students. A female lecturer gave an example to illustrate that students were, in her view, becoming so demanding that she felt treated as a mere resource by her students:

*... I got email from my students. ... sometimes even five questions in the email. Usually, I am not sure about ... content, either ... I actually question which I ... syllabus when it is deadline, ... or how should I reference bibliography? And these are all in the handout ... and some materials ... provided to the students ... in the syllabus as well. Then you will get these kinds of questions ... which students can't bother to cross check the syllabus, or to check the website, ... or to check the handbook. They use me ... as a short hand ... for data. (Respondent 44)*

#### **1.4 Student course evaluation fatigue**

Except for the fear that student course evaluation would change power relations between academics and students, there was a perception that course evaluation fatigue had set in among both academics and students. The perceived fatigue was caused by two main factors: students did not take the evaluation seriously, and academics had difficulty in meeting various needs of students.

##### **1.4.1 Students not taking evaluation seriously**

Six of the departments/schools in the sample revealed that they normally set a period

of time at the end of the class for students to fill in the evaluation forms because if the evaluation was sent after the class students would not bother to fill it in and to hand it back. One third of respondents affirmed that they found it difficult for students to engage in the evaluation process because although some students regarded the evaluation as an important opportunity for them to give their opinions, many other students did not take the evaluation seriously. Respondents also perceived students as unable to produce objective comments when required to fill in the evaluation form. For example, a female lecturer in a department of social science argued that it was because students spent little time thinking about their comments:

*Err, yes, to some extent. I speak quickly, I suppose, you notice that. It is good to ... be reminded ... and I have Powerpoint and human information, so ... these sort of small comments... are useful. In terms of standard comments, I don't think students are very objective and ... they don't usually spend time ... commenting on that. ... (Respondent 22)*

What respondent 22 suggested was that students did not take the evaluation seriously and they were not competent to evaluate teaching. This lack of competence, according to Rowley (2003), is because students' assessment will be influenced by different variables, such as their ethnic background, gender and age, the size of the class, the centrality of the course (compulsory or optional), and the instructor's characteristics, (rank, experience, reputation, research skills, gender, minority status, and physical appearance). For example, a lecturer who has a more attractive personality, regardless of how good they are at teaching, can get better 'scores' from students.

#### **1.4.2 Difficulty in meeting the needs of students**

Except for the perception that students did not take the evaluation seriously, fifteen respondents expressed their difficulty in meeting student needs because these changed every year. It was thus difficult to apply the evaluation result of the previous year to the following year's students. The most detailed example to illustrate this

difficulty was given by respondent 9 who was responsible for quality assurance in the faculty of science. I quote from her at length here to give a flavor of her response:

*What the problem is of course, over the years, I found, for example, the students said to me, for example, on one case, said I lectured too much and didn't give them enough time for classroom discussion, so the next year, I responded to that and had much class discussion. Actually, they said that they didn't want that much. So sometimes you find you can't win. (laughter) So you have to try and say students have different styles and some got to say what they think about things and both learning from the different techniques, now do you say that all right, every unit you have a mixtured style. I am a tutor and I have to mix up the style which I am doing it. Do I have to do it within every session of every unit? So is there time for discussion and the sound lecture? Or do I have some sessions that are just lectures and some sessions just discussing that lecture? Or do you provide mixture by one tutor who is good at lecturing and one tutor who is good at small classroom group? How do you provide that mixed opportunities?. (Respondent 9)*

Respondent 9 was unusual among respondents in her response in the face of unwelcome change among her students because she found it difficult to cope with the variety of student needs. She suggested that some academics became confused and anxious under the pressure of student course evaluation which as a result made academics perceive the evaluation as a heavy burden imposed upon them and caused them fatigue.

To conclude, student course evaluation was perceived as an important quality assurance mechanism in affecting respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice and power relations between academics and students. The potentially changed power relations between academics and students correspond with the arguments that student course evaluation is a device to curb the power of academics (Morley, 2003), and that student evaluation represents a source of authority that changes the balance of power within academic institutions (Moore & Kuol, 2005).

However, a further analysis of the interview data suggests that although all seven departments in the research sample confirmed that student course evaluation was

important, its impact in the judging quality of a lecture was perceived as limited. If some academics got a lot of negative student comments, the department/school did not automatically assume that there was something wrong with their teaching because they wanted to take a wider view. Most departments had a system for making use of student evaluation data which gave the lecturer an opportunity to comment as well. Sometimes, the person with specific responsibility for learning and teaching in the department/school would look at the comments made by both students and lecturers, and then would come to her/his own judgement, which might include recommendations about how teaching might change in the future and about how things were organized in the department. This suggests that departments/schools would change the course only when they were convinced that students had made a valid point, and that student course evaluation was taken seriously but with reservation. Moreover all the departments/schools in the research sample not only used student course evaluation but also used peer observation to assure and to enhance the quality of teaching. How peer observation has affected the work of academics will be analyzed below.

### **Section two: Impact of peer observation on teaching**

According to the case study university, peer observation is a formative process and a learning experience for both those observed and those observing. It aims to create the space and opportunity for those being observed and those observing to reflect on their teaching. The case study university provided guidelines on peer observation, requiring that all departments / schools should operate a system of peer observation of teaching, with at least one formative observation of each core member of teaching staff, as identified by the Head of Department / School, during any two year period.

## 2.1 Drivers for peer observation

An analysis of the interview data reveals that there were two main perceived drivers for peer observation: quality audit and academics' promotion need. These factors were the same as those for student course evaluation. Respondents in general regarded peer observation as a quality assurance mechanism driven by quality audit. One third of respondents asserted that peer observation was a form of control by the audit process, so they showed little interest in it. This finding is similar with that of Cockburn (2005) that if academics perceive peer observation as a tool to meet the demands of the external quality assurance bodies, academics might regard it as a coercive quality assurance instrument designed to hold them to account.

The view that peer observation was a control mechanism was well illustrated by a respondent responsible for quality assurance in the faculty of science. He stated that one reason why the case study university adopted peer observation was to pre-empt anyone external to the department coming to observe their teaching:

*... (Laughter) When we have done it, we probably have not. There was peer observation for new member of staff who was on probation, but for doing it for everybody, I don't think every department has been doing it. The suggestion was made to us that if we didn't start doing it that someone external will come in and do it, so it is internal quality assurance and people like see it as part of the overall quality assurance package. (Respondent 8)*

What respondent 8 implied was that when academics were subjected to peer observation, few of them would like to use it as a means to criticize their colleagues or as a means of getting information in the same way as student course evaluation where academics felt threatened. One reason for respondents dislike of using peer observation to criticize their colleagues, according to Peel (2005), is because academics generally do not want to provide negative criticism to undermine their colleagues' confidence.

A further analysis of the interview data reveals that except for quality audit, the other

important driver for academic respondents taking up peer observation was academics' probationary period. Nearly all the respondents agreed that early career academics were more frequently peer observed than senior staff. The early career academics, who had worked for less than three years and who were in their probationary period, were peer observed annually in the case study university. This finding suggests that academic staff who have been academics for less than 3 years would regard peer observation as an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching because they are still on a 'learning curve' and need to develop their own teaching style (Douglas & Douglas, 2006, p.8).

A head of school who had worked over 20 years in a medical related course confirmed this view and argued that peer observation worked well for early career academics in the case study university:

*... It (peer observation) fits very well for young staff, so the young lecturers they come in as probationary lectures and they do teaching and learning programmes within the university. It works very well for them because they want to do it and they want to get the feedback and they want to learn. It doesn't work well on people like me (laughter), because it is very hard to get motivated to organize it be done. (Respondent 10)*

What respondent 10 implied was that academics' early career period made peer observation a compulsory practice among young staff and that peer observation would enable early career academics to learn from their experienced colleagues. However, there is an indication that when peer observation was perceived as confined to assessing the early career performance of academics, this would affect respondents' perception of and attitudes towards peer observation. One example is that peer observation was implemented inconsistently at departmental level, which will be analyzed in the section below.

## **2.2 Inconsistent implementation of peer observation**

The inconsistent implementation of peer observation was apparent from respondents' different understandings of whether such a practice was compulsory or not. The policy of the case study university is that peer observation is compulsory, but only about two thirds of respondents regarded such a practice as compulsory. The other one third of respondents preferred to treat peer observation as a voluntary activity in their departments because many of their departmental colleagues had not been peer observed recently. The interview data suggests that manager-academics were more likely to perceive peer observation as compulsory than their academic colleagues. One explanation is that the case study university expected peer observation to be compulsory, so manager-academics knew more about this university policy than academic respondents.

Among respondents who perceived peer observation as a compulsory practice, there was a view that treating the observation as compulsory had made it hard for the department/school to set up a peer observation system because it took up academics' time. Academics were thus unwilling to take part in it, unless their department had organised it conveniently. Some manager-academics were not supportive in addressing peer observation as a compulsory practice because they feared that academics would feel forced and obliged and then they would become resistant to this practice. This reveals that making peer observation a compulsory practice had made respondents perceive it as quality audit regulation. This finding supports the argument of Lomas & Nicholls (2005), Lomas & Kinchin (2006), and Shortland (2004) that peer observation is a political and cultural drive to raise teaching quality via the development and sharing of good practice. The perceived regulation of peer observation helps to explain why manager-academics in the case study university preferred to use the word 'recommendation' in suggesting academics carry out peer observation.



A further analysis of the interview data suggests that although one third of respondents treated peer observation as a voluntary practice, there was also a problem in carrying it out because of some academics' ignorance of it. For example, a head of school showed his concern of the problems of treating peer observation as a voluntary practice:

*... As a matter of fact, it (peer observation) is going on for a long time ... on the voluntary basis, but it is the sort of one of things, because it is voluntary, it is quite a lot of people doing it, sometimes none. There are numerous discussions here about whether it should be compulsory. Usually it is the old member of staff who opposes the idea that they are compulsory. (laughter) (Respondent 12)*

What respondent 12 suggested was that peer observation as a voluntary practice would make some academics perceive it as unimportant, so there was little chance academics would take on the observation. This view was widely accepted among the other respondents who supported the view that peer observation should become a compulsory practice. The view that peer observation should become compulsory suggests that peer observation had not been really enforced and had not become a popular practice among academics. There is evidence that implementation of peer observation at the departmental level was inconsistent. For example, in one department, respondents perceived peer observation as a 'paper' exercise:

*(laughter) I think there are certain things happened and that is set up as departmental policy, ... so from that point of view, .. you can say compulsory. It (peer observation) is just not enforced. For example, if you are to have an external review, and documents were produced to say... what procedures are. It would be called peer observation, but the number of people engaging that... is certainly less complicate than the member of staffs. (Respondent 28)*

Similar views were expressed by respondents from the other two schools/departments. These respondents let it be known that peer observation was a new practice in their departments/schools and that not many of their colleagues had been peer observed. This confirms that peer observation as a quality assurance mechanism was not well implemented in these three schools/departments.

### 2.3 Perceived limited impact of peer observation on teaching

There is evidence that the inconsistent implementation of peer observation had affected its impact on respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Nearly half of respondents argued that peer observation had little impact on teaching. One perception was that peer observed academics were already pretty good teachers, so there was not much the observer could say. This view was only shared by nine respondents. In contrast, the most commonly accepted view among half of the respondents was that the guidelines for peer observation provided by the case study university were bureaucratic and unhelpful because they contained guidance on matters that the respondents did not want to talk about. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of social science argued that the guideline was too detailed to be used:

*I don't think it (peer observation) is so practical. .... I just think that it is too complicated and it is too detailed. ... (Respondent 1)*

The complexity of the guideline caused a concern that peer observation would force academics to conform to norms which lacked individuality, but retaining individuality could be the key to a successful lecture. For example, a head of school in a science faculty argued for the importance of this individuality and was critical of peer observation guidelines which he regarded as flawed:

*... You find what the students find most enjoyable about the lecture is that he is enthusiastic about the subject and the ability to cut through the Powerpoint materials to determine the most interested part of the materials that we can convey. ... That is ... quite difficult for peer observer to ... pick up upon, ... so for example, a lot of peer observation forms ... concern with the mechanism for delivering a lecture. Does ... the lecture contain eye contact with the students and is she standing still in the middle of the room? They are really stupid things you are asked... to comment on. (Respondent 15)*

It is evident that what respondent 15 expected was to get more enthusiasm for his subject, but peer observation did not pick up on that kind of thing because the observation emphasized more technical aspects of giving a lecture. This suggests that

when respondents had different expectations of peer observation, it would be hard for them to find the observation a useful practice.

## **2.4 Perceived improvement of teaching**

Although nearly half of respondents perceived peer observation as having little impact on their teaching, the other half of respondents regarded peer observation as a useful practice in improving the delivery of a class, providing suggestions on the content of lectures, and getting to know different teaching styles. Similar arguments are held by Bell (2001), Cockburn (2005), and Fletcher & Orsmond (2004).

The interview data suggests that one reason why half of respondents argued for the importance of peer observation in the case study university was because teaching is traditionally a private activity, done behind closed doors. Respondents did not feel like talking to people about what they did and how they approached teaching, but there might be some important techniques embedded in their teaching practice. When peer observation came in, it provided views from the outside which helped to develop and to implement new ideas about teaching and to improve teaching practice. Sometimes peer observation gave respondents confidence that they had reached expected standards within their departments. In general, the perceived improvement in the delivery of class among half of respondents mainly took the form of using new technology, more engagement with students, and not interrupting students' discussion in the seminar, of which use of new technology was the most frequently discussed among respondents. For example, a respondent responsible for quality assurance in the faculty of science pointed out that some respondents began to use Powerpoint after being peer observed:

*... What happens is sometimes, members of staff has changed the way they deliver, ... to switch to a Powerpoint, or they are introduced a new topic and they ensure that all is done and to confirm the feedback. That happens quite a lot. ... (Respondent 8)*

Except for new technology, increased engagement with students was another perceived important improvement caused by peer observation. For example, a female lecturer in a medical related course articulated that there was more engagement with students due to peer observation:

*I think the sort of feedback they get people they are observing, just suggestions... about, perhaps, engage the students a bit more ... and way just talking to them got students all after questions, so suggestions like that ... I think, they find quite useful. Maybe being clear about stuff what is get covered in the session, that sort of things, ... I think. (Respondent 44)*

The interview data suggests that engagement with students included some other minor changes, for example, how to develop a discussion in class. A female lecturer in a social science department gave an example on students' discussion in his class:

*One of the things I picked up was ... the discussion in the seminar is a sort of ... free flowing and I don't ... try to interrupt it... as little as possible. Most of the students, you know,... they can manage their discussion, but sometimes some students feel like ... you say something ... when their discussion is going on. (Respondent 18)*

Together with improvement of the delivery of a class, there was evidence that peer observation had helped five respondents in different subject areas to improve the content of their lectures. One example was given by a head of school in a faculty of science who argued that peer observation helped lecturers to realize which bits of the lecture was difficult for students to follow, so lecturers made changes in that aspect. The changes in lecturing practice, according to a senior administrator in academic staff development, was because peer observation had enriched academics' teaching techniques and had provided academics with a chance to learn from their colleagues:

*... The colleagues observing could think that: 'oh, this could be improved if my colleagues just did that. Or I can see the students are really engaged in this point and this is a better to help them to engage in this subject. Or the observer might think, gosh, that is a good technique. I am going to use that in my teaching, so I think that is real quality assurance and that does improve things. (Respondent 53)*

What respondent 53 implied was that peer observation was important in enabling

academics to learn from each other. In spite of the above evidence that peer observation was perceived as useful in improving undergraduate classroom teaching practice, respondents in general were not particularly interested in being peer observed.

## **2.5 Academics' reluctance to take up peer observation**

Nearly one third of respondents did not see any value in peer observation and treated it as an unnecessary practice. Three different perceptions explained their reluctance to take up peer observation: peer observation was interference in teaching; peer observation was resource heavy and bureaucratic; and senior staff observing junior staff would make the observation an intimidating experience. These perceptions are discussed below according to their popularity among respondents.

The perception that peer observation was an unwelcome attempt to curtail academic autonomy in the classroom was accepted by four manager-academics and five academic respondents. For example, a senior administrator in academic staff development argued that criticism from peer observation would make academics feel threatened:

*I think they worried that colleagues might be critical of their teaching and there might not be constructive criticism. I think it is a bit threatening, sometimes, you know, you have autonomy, maybe they think that colleagues might pinch their ideas. ... (Respondent 53)*

What respondent 53 implied was that respondents had been treating teaching as a private activity, so they did not expect their teaching to be interfered with by their colleagues or by other external forces. As a result, respondents did not expect their teaching to be influenced by peer observation because peer observation was perceived as interference, which made respondents show reluctance in taking part in it.

The fact that academics in the case study university were under tremendous pressure to do research and teaching, made a lot of respondents perceive peer observation as another unwelcome chore for them to do. It was termed as resource heavy by seven manager-academics. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of science argued that academics' resistance was caused by their increased workload with peer observation as part of the problem:

*I can not look at the mind of the other women and men. ... but I suspect that they may feel that they are very busy with many other things, and peer observations would take up a few minutes of their times, so it must be an issue of workload. (Respondent 4)*

The heavy workload caused by peer observation was seen as bureaucratic by respondents, so they showed resistance to it. However, there is a contradiction in respondents' perception of peer observation as bureaucratic because according to Max Weber, bureaucracy is 'the means of transforming social actions into rationally organized action' (Roth, G. & Wittich, C., 1968, p. 987). Similarly Watson (2003, p.8) argues that

*bureaucracy is the control and co-ordination of work tasks through a hierarchy of appropriately qualified office holders, whose authority derives from their expertise and who rationally devise a system of rules and procedures that are calculated to provide the most appropriate means of achieving specified ends.*

This suggests that bureaucracy is originally related with hierarchy, a system of people or things arranged in a graded order, but in peer observation, there is no hierarchy between observers and observees because the observation only involves academics observing their peers academics' lectures and then filling in the forms. This suggests that respondents perceived bureaucracy differently from Webber and Watson. These respondents used bureaucracy/bureaucratic as a derogatory label for things they did not want to do. For example, a head of school confirmed this view and asserted that he was not surprised that academics showed resistance to peer observation because they also showed resistance to other quality assurance mechanisms:

*Sure, my experience is that anything, any other bureaucracy which imposed on them (academics) to do and that consumes their time is resisted. It is not necessarily peer observation. It may be some other forms of quality assurance, whatever it is. Maybe they are required to do some form of internal audit, or fulfill in the questionnaire or whatever. Anything takes time is resisted because we have a huge amount of work. (Respondent 13)*

Except for the view that peer observation was resource heavy and bureaucratic, there was a concern among six respondents that senior staff observing junior staff had made the observation an intimidating experience because of the power imbalance created by the higher rank of the observer. A respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of engineering argued that in order to minimize this problem senior and junior staff should observe each other, so they could learn from each other:

*... I think it was done in such a way for example, only people in senior positions observed people in lower position. That would not be good. ... The head of department observing the new member of staff and the new member of staff observe the head of department. Not necessarily to learn from what the head of department does, but to be critical at what the head of department does because new person coming in and you don't have good ideas about teaching, because you have been an education receiver for several years, you must come to see somebody like me who has been teaching for years. .... (Respondent 7)*

To summarize, section 2 suggests that although peer observation was perceived as important it has limitations in improving academics' undergraduate classroom teaching practice, and that about one third of respondents showed resistance to it. All the seven departments/schools in the research sample had realized the limitation of peer observation and adopted some other quality assurance mechanisms to improve the quality of teaching, one of which is annual programme review.

### **Section three: Annual Programme Review (APR)**

In the case study university, all teaching programmes are required to go through Annual Programme Review which is carried out by a department gathering feedback

on its taught and research programmes from students, departmental staff and external examiners every year. Reflections or reports on individual units are taken into account, together with statistical information such as student progression rates and proportions of degrees awarded by classification. All these elements are required to be discussed at a departmental meeting and a brief summary report written. The review report outlines the positive features of the programme(s) and any action to be taken on the basis of evaluation.

### **3.1 Various attitudes towards APR**

According to the case study university, annual programme review was important and compulsory, but the interview data suggests that manager-academics and academic respondents held different attitudes towards the review. Manager-academics, especially the heads of schools, argued for the importance of the APR in providing academics with a framework to think things through. They perceived the review as important in affecting both undergraduate classroom teaching practice and wider curriculum development. In contrast, nearly half of the academic respondents had little knowledge of the review or found it had little effect on their teaching or the curriculum. Although these academic respondents felt obliged to conduct the review to satisfy the university requirement, they found the review only concerned with general departmental issues, without having a direct impact on their undergraduate classroom teaching practice. The interview data reveals that one reason for academic respondents and manager-academics' holding different attitudes towards the APR was that the review was quality audit related, so manager-academics had to prove to outsiders that this internal quality assurance mechanism was in place and was fulfilling its purposes. Therefore they treated the review more seriously than their academic colleagues.

In spite of the fact that the APR was regarded as important by manager-academics,



its implementation varied between departments/schools. One example is that respondents, even manager-academics, did not have a consistent view of how long the review had been in existence within their departments/schools. Perceptions varied between two and nine years. However, according to a senior administrator in academic staff development, the APR had existed in the case study university for four years. One implication of the perceived different length of time that the APR had been in force is that some departments/schools might have been using the review long before the case study university required this, whilst some other departments/schools had only started to use it more recently. This suggests that the APR was not taken seriously in some departments/schools. Three senior manager respondents in charge of undergraduate studies in the faculty of science confirmed that the APR was not generally taken seriously in their faculties. A full quotation from one such respondent makes this point as follows:

*... There are aspects of it (Annual Programme Review) which are perhaps just paper pushing. But it encourages an open sort of government and therefore colleagues are more conscious I think. There are opportunities to change these things, but maybe in department, programme review is just two people in the corner and having a cup of coffee, and no one else knows about it. I do not know, (laughter) (Respondent 3)*

What respondent 3 suggested was that the APR was not taken seriously and was not well implemented at the department/school level. This implies that one reason for respondents showing resistance to the APR is because it was perceived as a quality assurance mechanism. This confirms the finding in section 2 and section 3 that when respondents had to deal with quality assurance mechanisms, they tended to show little interest in these jobs because their priority was teaching and research and because these respondents already had a heavy workload in the case study university (Chapter 6), which as a result made respondents pay little attention to the APR and perceive it as a superficial activity and as another chore for them to do. After the analysis of respondents' perception of the APR, the section below explores whether the APR had had some impact on respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice and the curriculum.

### 3.2 Impact of APR on teaching and curriculum

An analysis of the interview data reveals that it was manager-academics who liked to argue that the review had affected their undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Nearly half of the manager-academics in the sample found the review important in drawing comments from the external examiners and in making academics more aware of the need of the students. For example, a respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of arts argued that the APR would have an affect on academics' teaching:

*Well, again, it (annual programme review) will have an impact, because it involves looking closely at external evaluation of the programme. It involves looking at the student evaluation programme. It involves at staff evaluation programme, so if problems are highlighted ...by that process, the problem will be tackled. And there will be improvement. (Respondent 6)*

A respondent in charge of undergraduate teaching in the faculty of arts shared similar views that the APR would affect academics' teaching. He illustrated changes caused by the APR, such as topics in class and students' skill development:

*... I think it is definitely useful and important. You know, some changes have come from it. In terms, sometimes thinking about what options the unit should be put on in coming years, so thinking about the balance of different topics, how we require students to develop particular skills. (Respondent 5)*

Five heads of schools/departments confirmed the view of respondent 5 and argued that the APR could regulate what academics did. However, these respondents did not reveal which specific aspects of teaching had been changed. What these respondents argued for was that the review provided them with a chance to engage more with feedback from students and with external examiners, so they would change the programme accordingly. However, there is little evidence that individual respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice had been affected by the review. Instead the APR was perceived to have raised nothing new, but was repetitious of what respondents had done before. For example, a female professor used her personal experience to illustrate that doing the APR was like 'jumping

through the hoop' because preparing for the review was not much different from what she did for the RAE:

*Again, I can only speak from my experience. ... I wrote the Annual Programme Review for ... PhD programme ... two weeks ago, and I have to say ... that I feel like... jumping through the hoop .... because part was ... the same material for the RAE exercises. And now ... I am just keeping the paper and .... repeat what I say earlier. The main frustration is... that ... information is available, but it has to keep being provided, ... in the different forms, for ... the multiple exercises. I do feel that we are received in different kind of ways and perhaps ... they all need to be ... lined up and you can just provide information ... once (laughter) (Respondent 46)*

What respondent 46 implied was that the APR had little impact on teaching. A respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of social science confirmed this view and explained that it was because the review was actually a chance for academics to sit together to talk about what they had been doing and what they should do next. This suggests that the APR was perceived to have limited impact on teaching by academic respondents.

Except for the perceived limited impact of the APR on teaching, the interview data reveals that academic respondents and manager-academics held different views about how the APR affected the curriculum. The majority of academic respondents did not think the review by itself would affect the curriculum because the review was an opportunity to see how the different components of the programme related to each other, and because the impact of the review was perceived to be quite slow. However, these respondents assumed that the process of doing the review would reflect the nature of the curriculum and thus gave them ideas for changes. In contrast, nearly half of manager-academics argued that the APR had affected their curriculum because the review provided them with an open approach to suggest curriculum change and to get different ideas from academics, which as a result would change the curriculum. For example, a respondent in charge of quality assurance in the faculty of social science explained this point:

*Well, as I said, the impact will be providing a more balanced or perhaps*

*coherent set of units within the pathway. (Respondent 9)*

In spite of the above argument that the APR had some effect on the curriculum, very few respondents asserted that the APR had produced specific effects. What the majority of respondents argued was that the APR provided them with a chance to make recommendations to develop their curriculum or for their curriculum review committee, which would result in changes. This confirms the view above that the impact of the APR on the curriculum was perceived as limited.

Together with the APR, the case study university uses another quality assurance mechanism. This is the approval system for new and revised programmes, to assure and enhance their quality. The section below analyzes how this approval system had affected respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice and curriculum.

#### **Section four: Approval system for new and revised programmes**

The interview data suggests that all the respondents perceived the approval system as compulsory and that all changes to units/programmes and all new programmes have to be approved by at least one committee because the university wants to ensure that any changes made to units/programmes, or any new units/programmes, are academically appropriate and sound; and that sufficient resource can and will be made available to ensure their successful delivery. There is an indication that respondents' knowledge of the approval system varied with their rank of position. Nearly all the manager-academics knew about the approval system. In contrast, two thirds of academic respondents had little knowledge of the approval system because if a department needed to present a programme within the programme guidelines it was more likely that the programme director and the head of school would apply for approval, rather than a member of academic staff without such a managerial responsibility.

#### 4.1 Approval system as bureaucratic scrutiny

Except for academic respondents' lack of knowledge of the approval system, very few respondents regarded the approval system as useful and important. The majority of respondents perceived the approval system as bureaucratic scrutiny because whenever departments needed to make a minor change, they had to go through a lot of paper work. A senior lecturer in a science related department for example showed his concern that filling in a lot of forms had made the approval system very complicated:

*... I think the system is too complicated. ... When we want to change a unit for our whole programme, ... we have to fill in ... a lot of different forms. Even just one minor change of the unit.... The whole system is very complicated and we have a lot of trouble... keeping track of the forms. (Respondent 62)*

What respondent 62 implied was that the approval system was bureaucratic, time consuming, and a paper exercise. This view was shared and discussed by many other academic respondents. There is evidence that what most academic respondents were critical of in the approval system was the long period of time needed to get a new programme/unit approved. For example, a female professor in a social science related department used her experience to demonstrate that the approval system was too time consuming:

*Well, it takes ages. It is tedious. It is so ... long. I just got a new course through last year. It was so long to get through it. ... You have to go to... so much committee and so much paper work. That discourages from doing it.... I think, it is good to have scrutiny, but you have to be careful ... not to have so much scrutiny. (Respondent 43)*

The interview data indicates that not only academic respondents who got involved with the approval system found it time consuming. Many other academic respondents who did not have experience of the approval system also argued against the lengthy approval system. There are other reasons for respondents' dislike of the approval system. One was that the perception of respondents that academics could be easily influenced by their colleagues. The other was that academics in general

showed resistance to quality assurance mechanisms which included the approval system. For example, a female lecturer in a social science department confirmed that academics in general treated the approval system as a control mechanism mainly designed to satisfy the QAA:

*Well, the unit has to be approved by the faculty. ... Again the template for that ... is just something that is filled. You know, it is filed away for the QAA. It is not anything ... people would actually ... look at, when they design their syllabus or course. (Respondent 18)*

Aside from the perception that the approval system was time consuming, respondents treated the approval committee's use of assessors who were not regarded as professional as another sign of bureaucracy. For example, a male lecturer doing quality assurance jobs in an art related department argued against the use of inappropriate assessors in the approval system:

*It (approval system of new and revised programmes/units) is just a waste of ... our time because who is the faculty ... can say ... whether or not ... my unit on philosophy or physics is any good. They haven't got any CLUE! I teach ××× foundations of physics. How can someone from English ... comment ... on my unit and the book ... in my bibliography is ... the right ones. They just looked to say ... there are 6 books on bibliography ... and checked to see that ... it says some words ... on what the course will do. I would say anything ... and they can't tell. If I say something that ... I don't understand quantitative mechanisms ...I will be a terrible teacher ... of subject and no one in the faculty ... would know, so I agree that ... it would be good ... if it could tell, but it can't. (Respondent 58)*

The examples above suggest that academics in general regarded the approval system as bureaucratic scrutiny and as a paper trail exercise. How the approval system had affected the work of academics will be analyzed below.

#### **4.2 Setting minimum standards for the curriculum**

The interview data suggests that 14 respondents found the approval system for new and revised programmes/units important and useful. Of these 14 respondents, 6 were

manager-academics and 8 were academic respondents. These respondents argued for the beneficial effect of the approval system. One argument was that the approval system provided an external view on the programme. The other argument was that if anyone wanted to change the programme, they had to get it approved first. The approval process would make academics think carefully about their unit and their subject. For example, a head of school of a medical related course argued for the usefulness of the approval system in changing the curriculum:

*It is useful, because people will become aware if you want to do something new, it takes time because of the paper exercise and it has to go through a number of committees and so forth. That makes a difference. It is rather the other way around. People perceive that somehow they need to make a change in the curriculum, to make that change, they have to go through that process, so ... probably they have the curriculum changed in mind already. (Respondent 13)*

Although 14 respondents argued for the importance of the approval system, few supporters of this system produced specific examples to illustrate how their curriculum had been improved. What these respondents emphasized was that the approval system in general made sure that their programmes had met a minimum quality threshold. In other words, if they had got a good programme, the approval system was not going to make it any better, but if they had got a weak programme, the approval system might change it from weak to satisfactory. For example, a female lecturer in a social science department made this view explicit:

*... Because once the nature of the curriculum was set ..., the approval system simply makes sure that ... the course is like the unit being proposed ... but we have a set of open options and ... that is not really an issue, but basically what people try to do is to make sure that ... it is at appropriate level and it is really ... the course makes sense and we think the students might be ... and the reading is up to date, that sort of ... things, but it doesn't affect the curriculum ... like quality assurance of particular unit and not the programme as a whole. (Respondent 21)*

To conclude, section 5 reveals that the majority of respondents treated the approval system as a quality assurance mechanism for them to observe in order to fulfill the needs of quality audit, so these respondents perceived the approval system as

bureaucratic scrutiny. There is little evidence that the approval system had affected curriculum and undergraduate classroom teaching practice significantly except that it set a minimum standard to ensure that programmes and units met a quality threshold.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described and analyzed how four internal quality assurance mechanisms (student course evaluation, peer observation, annual programme review, and approval system for new and revised programmes) within the case study university were perceived to have affected respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum, and power relations between respondents and students. The case study reveals that these four mechanisms were meant to be compulsory, but their effects varied by department. One example is that respondents disagreed with whether peer observation was compulsory or not. Two thirds of respondents perceived the observation as compulsory, but the remaining third regarded it as voluntary activity because they were seldom peer observed. This suggests that peer observation was implemented inconsistently in schools/departments. This is one reason for the perceived limited effect of peer observation on respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Similarly, although student course evaluation was perceived to have been taken seriously by each department/school in the sample, its impact on respondents' teaching was regarded as limited. It had become a common practice for departments/schools to combine the result of student course evaluation with peer observation to judge the quality of academics' teaching. Moreover annual programme review and the approval system for new and revised programmes were perceived as important and compulsory, but there is little evidence that these two systems had affected individual respondent's teaching and curriculum in a significant way.

A further analysis of the interview data suggests that respondents held different



attitudes towards the four internal quality assurance mechanisms studied. Student course evaluation was perceived as the most important and most useful quality assurance mechanism in improving respondents' teaching practice. In contrast, the programme approval system was perceived as the least important one because it was only seen as useful in providing minimum standards to ensure that the quality of the programme/unit was good. Moreover, the majority of respondents regarded student course evaluation as more useful in improving academics' teaching practice than peer observation because the observation was relatively positive, whilst the student evaluation commented on respondents' teaching skills more critically.

Aside from the different attitudes of respondents towards these four internal quality assurance mechanisms, respondents generally viewed these mechanisms as quality audit related and labelled them as bureaucratic scrutiny in spite of the fact that these mechanisms were perceived to have achieved some positive impact on their work. For example, student course evaluation was perceived as useful in improving the ways respondents presented information and the content of lectures but there was a view among respondents that the evaluation was a technical and rational tool to subject academics to both internal institutional regulation procedures and external scrutiny and judgement. About two thirds of respondents feared that if the perceived power relations between academics and students were changed due to the evaluation, academics would become more accountable to students and students would become more demanding. This suggests that respondents treated student course evaluation as important, but was perceived as a tool of quality audit regulation. A similar view applies to peer observation.

The case study also suggests that peer observation was perceived as important in improving respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice, especially among respondents who were in their early academic career, but some respondents showed resistance to peer observation and were critical of its bureaucracy. However, there is a contradiction between respondents' view of bureaucracy and the original meaning

of bureaucracy. According to Weber, bureaucracy refers to the control and co-ordination of work tasks through a hierarchy of appropriately qualified office holders (Roth, G. & Wittich, C., 1968). This suggests that bureaucracy is related with hierarchy, but peer observation does not involve hierarchy because it is intended to be an activity between academics who are peers. Therefore the observation is not like Institutional Audit where there is hierarchy between the audited institution and the QAA, and where the institution and its faculty, department/school are required to produce a lot of paper work. Hence, it is Institutional Audit not peer observation that should be perceived as 'bureaucratic'. The perception of peer observation as bureaucratic suggests that respondents tended to use bureaucracy as a label for things they did not want to do, and for things that were not perceived as not sufficiently closely related to their teaching and research.

Furthermore, respondents in general were critical of the perceived limitations of the internal quality assurance mechanisms studied, such as students' evaluation not being objective, peer observation being used mainly for the purpose of academic promotion, and the approval system and the annual programme review being time consuming. However, in spite of these limitations, respondents still regarded such mechanisms as useful and important in improving their work to some degree. Respondents' mixed views towards the internal quality assurance mechanisms were similar to the attitudes they displayed towards the external mechanisms.

The case study also suggests that respondents' perception of the internal quality assurance mechanisms are influenced by their rank or position. It was manager-academics who were more likely to argue for the importance and the usefulness of the internal quality assurance mechanisms than academic respondents. One reason was that manager-academics in general knew more about these mechanisms than academic respondents. Another reason was because manager-academics undertook a management role. They were obliged to implement these mechanisms and had more knowledge of the impact they had on the work of

academics and on the department/school/faculty/university than their academic colleagues, so the manager academic respondents argued for the importance of these mechanisms as a result.

After an analysis of respondents' perceptions of the four internal quality assurance mechanisms and the impact of these mechanisms on their work, the next chapter is going to compare respondents' views towards internal quality assurance mechanisms and external ones, aiming to find out whether respondents perceived these mechanisms differently or not and the reasons for the perceived difference.

## **Chapter 10: The Challenges and Tensions of the Quality Audit Process and Professional Authority**

### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters analysed the perceived impact of external and internal quality assurance mechanisms on the work of academics. The intention here is to compare respondents' perceptions of the external quality assurance mechanisms with perceptions of the internal mechanisms and to assess the extent to which the quality audit processes and cultures as a whole is perceived to have affected the work product of the respondents. The term 'quality audit' in this chapter is used as a social science concept. It is not a proxy term for the QAA; instead it refers to an audit culture that includes not only the Institutional Audit of the QAA, but also the assessment activities of a range of quality assurance mechanisms researched for this dissertation, such as, external examining, the 2005 National Student Survey, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, peer observation (See Chapter 2).

As discussed in Chapter 3, quality audit is a holistic concept that is closely related to quality assurance mechanisms because a quality audit claims to have achieved its impact on those subjected to it through implementation of these mechanisms (Power, 1994, 1997). This study explores the perceived impact of the quality audit on the work of respondents through examining how these mechanisms are believed to have affected the work of the respondents of my case study with the aim of revealing precisely what respondents liked and what they disliked about the quality audit concept.

In addition, the very existence and growth of an audit culture has become a source of debate among academic researchers. For example, Power (1994, 1997) regards audit as the control of control because the audited organizations develop their own internal

system of control and the actual external audit process. In other words, the external quality assurance mechanisms concentrate on applying their own controls in the organization being audited. In contrast, Shore & Wright (2000) argue that audit is a culture of new forms of governance and power, which are designed to engender among academic staff, new norms of conduct and professional behaviour that meet the needs of the external requirements, for example, the funding council. Both Power and Shore & Wright imply that audit is a form of power and control imposed upon academics to change the nature of academic work. This chapter explores that prospect and whether respondents in the case study university perceived the quality audit as a form of power and undue control over their work and whether the process of the audit produced among respondents a culture shift to new norms of conduct and professional behaviour that met the criteria of the quality audit control.

Three separate steps were taken to illustrate respondents' perceptions of quality audit. Step One compares the perceived impact of external quality assurance mechanisms on the work of respondents with the impact of internal mechanisms. That comparison worked to reveal that the internal mechanisms were perceived to have more significant impact on the work of respondents than the external mechanisms and explain the reasons for respondents' preference of the internal mechanisms. Step Two analyzes the perception of respondents regarding quality audit processes as a whole to illustrate whether respondents perceived the quality audit as power control and whether a quality audit engendered among respondents new norms of professional behaviour. In the process of the quality audit, the case study university established quality assurance systems to affect the individual faculties and departments, for example, an Annual Programme Review. The analysis in Step Two aims to provide a holistic picture of how respondents perceived the nature of the quality audit as well as its impact on their professional effort work. The work of these academics included undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum content, and an examination of the power relations between academics and students. After the analysis of respondents' perceptions of quality audit, the third step explored

the reasons for respondents' mixed views toward the quality audit and suggesting that there was evidence of a perceived tension between the quality audit and the professional authority of respondents.

### **Section One: Respondent Preference Regarding Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

The interview data indicate that the study respondents, except for very early career stage staff, all had a varied experience of an external audit over the last two decades, including a Subject Review, and an Institutional Audit of the QAA. These respondents held both positive and negative views toward quality assurance mechanisms. However, respondents in general regarded internal mechanisms as more useful and more important than the external ones. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in a medical school argued for the supportive and regulatory function of the internal quality assurance mechanisms as follows:

*Err, ... I think it has a dual effect. One is supportive. It supports academic staff. It does that. But it is also regulatory, ensuring that good practice is done and the bad practice is not done. And it is supportive in the sense that it encourages good practice. It does both. ... The university has regulations about how programmes are managed. Internal quality assurance, particularly the faculty quality assurance would check that it is happening and that the regulations are being applied, so it is like a regulatory one. (Respondent 2)*

What Respondent 2 implied here is that the internal quality assurance mechanism was important and useful in ensuring good practices from academics. The interview data indicate that two thirds of the respondents perceived that a relatively recent good practice (probably resulting from the Subject Review in the 1990s up to the early 2000s) was increased awareness among academics that they should update their teaching units regularly and keep good records of their teaching for themselves and others to include reading lists, handouts, and PowerPoint slides. This change was considered to have made teaching in the department/school systematic and up-to-date during the quality audit process and suggests that the internal quality

assurance mechanisms were perceived to have the capacity to change the practice of academics at least to some degree.

In contrast, the majority of respondents implied that they were less affected by and cared less about the external quality assurance mechanisms because these mechanisms had less of an impact on their work than did the internal mechanisms. The different attitudes of respondents toward internal and external quality assurance mechanisms suggest that respondents preferred internal mechanisms to external ones for any regulation of their work. It is possible that when the QAA moved toward a much lighter touch system of audit, with the emphasis on subject- by- subject inspection disappearing in favor of an audit of the institution's academic systems and standards as a whole, respondents in general showed a greater preference toward the internal quality assurance mechanisms.

### **1.1 Familiarity of Respondents with Internal Mechanisms**

There are four main reasons for respondents' preference for internal quality assurance mechanisms. The most important reason is that the respondents, unless they held a management position, were more familiar with the internal mechanisms that were institution-specific than mechanisms imposed upon the institution externally. For example, respondents knew a lot more about peer observation and student course evaluation, two of the internal mechanisms researched (See Section 1 & Section 2 in Chapter 9), than they did about the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS), one of the external mechanisms that started in 2005. The majority of academic respondents below the level of the department/school head knew little about the NSS (See Section 3.1 in Chapter 8). One reason for respondents' familiarity with internal mechanisms was the fact that the external mechanisms checked the individual work of academics less frequently than did the internal mechanisms.

The internal mechanisms, particularly the student course evaluations, occur right through the year, while the external mechanisms are less frequent. For example, the QAA Institutional Audit only happens every five years and visits the institution for only a few days. This intensive visit, which on its most recent occasion included selected subject audit trails (Discipline Audit Trails), was perceived to have caused more stress for the department/school than did the internal quality assurance mechanisms. However, very few respondents found this intensive visit to have had great impact on their teaching, so respondents showed less interest in the Institutional Audit. In other words, because Institutional Audit did not affect respondents very particularly in their day-to-day efforts and only affected the overall policies of the institution, then the respondents were not as aware of the process and as interested in it.

## **1.2 Perceived Irrelevance of External Mechanisms to Work of Respondents**

There was a second important reason for respondents' preference for the internal mechanisms. They simply did not find the external mechanisms as relevant for their work as the internal ones. Except for the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory bodies, which control teaching and curriculum content of a professional/vocational programme, the 2005 National Student Survey was considered to be distant from the work of individual academics. The rest of the external mechanisms only tested whether the internal mechanisms within the institution were in place or not, so there was a perception among respondents that the external mechanisms could not have any direct impact on their work, particularly on their teaching, but merely were supposed to reinforce what they did. This perception is identical to the argument of Power (1994, 1997) that an audit is mainly concerned with the quality assurance systems in place so as to maintain the quality of teaching in the context of higher education institutions.



About two- thirds of the respondents from the case study university argued against the relevance of external quality assurance mechanisms on their teaching. For example, a Director of Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Arts asserted that these external mechanisms were not involved with individual academics' teaching:

*The external quality ... assurance mechanism is not supposed to have a direct impact on teaching. In theory, they are not testing quality of AAA (name of the case study university). What it's testing is 'Does AAA have its own mechanism for controlling quality and are these mechanisms working properly?' (Respondent 6)*

What Respondent 6 implied here is that the external quality assurance mechanism had very limited impact on the work of academics because of its minor relevance on the work of individual academics. Of the external mechanisms studied, the QAA and the NSS were perceived as the least relevant to respondents' teaching. For example, the majority of respondents found the QAA had little impact on their teaching because its 'light touch' audit method was little related to their experience and their knowledge of their work (See Section 1.1.2 Chapter 8).

Together with the view that external mechanisms were largely irrelevant, two- thirds of respondents held the view that the external mechanisms only reinforced what they already did. For example, a female lecturer in a medical- related course argued that the work of academics would remain the same without these quality assurance mechanisms:

*Err, ... I think ...a lot of quality assurance, I perceived, is ...showing us that perhaps ... we are doing things ok ... and in which case, it doesn't necessarily change it, so for that reason, I think, a lot ... would be the same, if we didn't have it. (Respondent 23)*

Respondent 23 showed doubt about the impact of external quality assurance mechanisms on the work of academics. Two- thirds of respondents shared her view and argued against the elaborate procedure of external mechanisms. The respondents named that procedure as paper trail only and paperwork for the sake of paperwork.

They showed strong resistance to this paperwork and argued that it cost them a huge amount of time that could otherwise be spent in improving the quality of their teaching. Moreover they had the fear that what was recorded on paper might be different from what they actually did. This fear suggests that there was danger in the audit's focusing on checking paper records because that aspect made two-thirds of the respondents perceive the quality audit as only concerned with the paperwork instead of the quality of their teaching.

This difference between respondents' perception of the quality audit and what the quality audit intended to achieve can be perceived as an 'expectation gap' (Power, 1994, p. 6). The quality audit now plays a remote assurance role in checking quality assurance systems of higher education institutions rather than individual academic teaching. The remote quality assurance role is different from what academics expect a quality audit to be and is different from what was done in the Subject Review. Therefore, when two-thirds of the respondents in the case study university found that the quality audit and its external quality assurance mechanisms focused on paper record instead of on teaching, the respondents perceived a large gap in expectations. As a result they considered the quality audit and its external mechanisms as very distant from their work.

### **1.3 Respondent Scepticism toward External Mechanisms**

The third reason for respondents' preference for internal quality assurance mechanisms was respondent scepticism of the measures undertaken by some of the external quality assurance process. The majority of respondents were critical of the survey methods of the 2005 NSS, specifically the way the survey was organized, the way it was run, and the poor quality of data the survey appeared to have collected. Therefore, there was a suspicion among respondents towards the quality of the survey results (See Section 3.3 in Chapter 8). Another example of respondent

scepticism for the measures taken by some external quality assurance mechanisms was that about one- third of respondents (11) in the second phase interviews were sceptical of the QAA assessors and did not perceive them as their peers (See Section 3.1 this chapter). This scepticism made respondents show less interest in the external mechanisms than in the internal ones. Their scepticism indicates that respondents had doubts regarding some of the audit methods and that there is a clear need for these methods to be changed in order to increase academics' confidence in and trust of the quality audit processes.

#### **1.4 Blurred Distinctions between External and Internal Mechanisms**

The fourth reason for respondents' preference for the internal quality assurance mechanisms was the distinction between internal and external mechanisms. It was rather blurred in some instances. Some external mechanisms were internalized in the case study university, but there is little evidence that respondents treated the internalized mechanisms as important. An example is the production of programme specifications for all teaching programmes. The QAA includes programme specification in its codes of practice, which suggests that programme specification is an external quality assurance mechanism. However, about half of the respondents thought programme specification was an internal mechanism, suggesting that programme specification was internalized in the case study university. However, the majority of respondents perceived the writing programme specification as artificial instead of being a completely true reflection of what the programme was actually about (See Section 1.3 Chapter 8). One implication of this finding is that although some external quality assurance mechanisms were internalized during the process of quality audit, it was still hard for respondents to accept these mechanisms as important and useful because they were perceived to have little effect on their actual work.

The above four reasons for respondents' preference for internal quality assurance mechanisms suggest that although external quality assurance mechanisms intend to improve the quality of teaching by checking the internal mechanisms or by giving graduates views on their experiences with programmes, respondents showed little interest in these external mechanisms. There was a gap between respondents' expectation of these mechanisms and how these mechanisms actually worked.

A further study of the interview data reveals that there are three aspects of respondents' preference for the internal quality assurance mechanisms. First, although respondents were more interested in internal mechanisms, their interest was selective; they only treated peer observation and student course evaluation as more important and more relevant to their work than the other internal mechanisms. They paid less attention to the annual programme review and the approval system for new and revised programmes (See Chapter 9). Respondents' priority for certain quality assurance mechanisms suggests that there is a need for the case study university to make changes in the way some quality assurance mechanisms work, for example, peer observation, in order to increase their relevance for the work of academics, especially if these mechanisms are to fulfill their aims in maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching.

A second implication of respondents' preference for the internal mechanisms is that the impact of the external mechanisms on their work could be further minimized due to respondents' ignorance of the nature of the external mechanisms. For example, nearly one-third of respondents took little notice of the external mechanisms, particularly the QAA. This ignorance and disinterest created a lack of communication between the QAA element of the quality audit process and academics, producing a greater barrier to quality audit's making a difference on the work of academics. Third, when respondents had little knowledge of the external quality assurance mechanisms, the 'expectation gap' for the audit (Power, 1994, p. 6) would be larger because respondents would more be likely to find the quality audit not

achieving what it aimed to achieve.

Considering that there were variations in respondents' attitudes toward the internal and the external quality assurance mechanisms and also considering that these mechanisms are indeed closely related with quality audit (See Section 4.1 in Chapter 3), it is important to analyze how respondents perceived the effect of the quality audit as a whole on their work and thereby explore whether the quality audit fully achieved its intended aim to improve the quality of teaching in the case study university.

## **Section Two: Respondents' Perception of the Quality Audit**

A careful study of the literature and an analysis of the interview data gleaned from the case study university reveal that the impact of quality audit processes on the work of academics varied in different time periods. In the early years of the quality audit processes, from HEFCE and QAA, the audit used Subject Review, carried out at the subject level, to check the quality of teaching and learning. This Subject Review appeared to affect the work of academics significantly. However, the current quality audit process, where this case study occurred, was perceived by respondents to have made less of an impact on the work of academics because of quality audit methods. These methods moved toward a light touch review instead of a subject level assessment. However, one feature of the audit, namely its 'administrative control' (Power, 1994, p.47) over higher education institutions, remains the same in the current quality audit process in spite of these changed methods. This administrative control has caused an impression among respondents that there are power hierarchies in place between the QAA and the case study university.

## 2.1 Administrative Control of the Quality Audit

An analysis of the literature, the interview data, and the official documents, namely those of the case study university and the QAA, reveals that external quality audit works as an administrative control over higher education institutions. Power (1994, p.19) interprets this aspect as 'control of control' because the audited institution establishes its own internal quality assurance mechanisms to assure quality of teaching, while the external mechanisms checks whether these internal mechanisms work properly according to these outside influences. Not only Power but also my respondents perceived quality audit as being administrative control over the case study university. Respondents perceived this control as meeting the requirement of the quality audit, including both Subject Review and Institutional Audit of the QAA because many of the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the case study university were established during the process of the quality audit, such as peer observation, annual programme review, an approval system for new and revised programmes and units, and a system of quality assurance affecting both the individual faculties and the departments. These internal mechanisms fall under the scrutiny of the QAA to ensure the public that these mechanisms are working to maintain the quality of teaching. For example, a senior administrator who was responsible for academic staff development at the case study university pointed out that the set-up of some internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution, such as programme review and the quality assurance team within the faculty, was one of the significant impacts of the Subject Review:

*Academic audit originally, and the university had its first visit in 1993. When that happened, we had almost no formal quality assurance mechanisms, except external examining. And since then we have built up various systems, but they are all based around academic practices, being the people who assure the quality. ... I think that is very important, because we all have quality assurance in place in interaction with students. (Respondent 53)*

The other fourteen respondents, most in management positions, agreed with Respondent 53 and articulated that the quality audit encouraged the establishment of

internal quality assurance mechanisms. For example, a respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Science suggested that the case study university had to make sure that its internal mechanisms were in order to convince the QAA that the quality of their teaching was good:

*I think it is now fairly recognized and the central point is that if we do not behave sensibly at the institutions, external bodies would make us do things we might not want to do, so we'd better try to regulate ourselves within a serious guideline than reaching a position that others tell us we must do. (Respondent 4)*

This quote suggests that quality assurance mechanisms are closely tied to the quality audit and that the audit uses these mechanisms to regulate the quality of teaching in the case study university. This finding corresponds with Power (1994, 1997), namely that the audit exerts administrative control to make sure that the quality assurance mechanisms within the audited university are in place and stay in place to maintain the quality of teaching expected by the audit.

## **2.2 Perceived Power Relations between the QAA and the University**

Together with the view that the quality audit works as an administrative control over the audited institution, there was a perception among respondents that the QAA created a power hierarchy that subordinated the case study university to the authority of the QAA. There were two main reasons for this perception – the institution's compliance with the Institutional Audit and the potential influence of the QAA on the reputation of the university.

English higher education institutions are still undergoing the Institutional Audit. Seventy higher education institutions were given their Institutional Audit reports by November 2004, and the second round of that audit is currently in progress (QAA, 2008b). To prepare for the Institutional Audit, the case study university has to establish its internal quality assurance mechanisms and produce paperwork to assure the QAA that their mechanisms work well enough to maintain the quality of teaching.

However, generally speaking, respondents hate the paperwork and perceive it as benign irrelevant to their teaching and an additional burden and bureaucracy. Take programme specification, for example. Most academic respondents showed little interest in the specification, but respondents who were programme directors still had to write the specification to meet the audit requirements (See Section 1.3 in Chapter 9). Respondents perceived the necessity to prepare paperwork and the establishment of internal quality assurance mechanisms as being university compliance with the requirement of the Institutional Audit and causing a sense among respondents that there was a bureaucratic power relation between the QAA and their university.

Moreover, the QAA makes its Institutional Audit results transparent to the public by publishing them on its website. Many respondents were aware that the Institutional Audit results could influence the reputation of the university, especially when undergraduates are paying higher fees since 2006. Students are now becoming more careful about which university they attend. A quarter of the respondents implied that if the university/school wanted to make money from students, they had to design courses that would attract students, especially international students. One perceived way was to get a good Institutional Audit result that could convince the public, including potential students, that the quality of the university was high. The reputation influence of the QAA, together with the case study university's compliance, with the requirements of the Institutional Audit made respondents feel that the QAA had considerable power over their university, especially in terms of setting up quality assurance mechanisms to meet the requirement of the audit.

Except for this perceived power relation, there is evidence that the quality audit worked as a symbolic regulation over the work of the respondents. In order to illustrate the symbolic regulatory role of the quality audit, first it's important to analyze the development of quality audit methods to reveal the different methods that do appear to have different impacts on the work of academics and also reveal that in spite of the perception that the quality audit worked as a symbolic regulation, the



audit did have a lasting impact on the work of one- third of the respondents.

### **2.3 From Subject Review to Institutional Audit**

Many researchers, such as Morley (2003) and Shore & Wright (2000), argue against Subject Review, a type of assessment of all subjects taught in higher education institutions in a cycle that started with Teaching Quality Assessment and lasted from 1993 to 2001 (QAA, 2008a). This review focused on assessment of teaching at subject levels. However, the Subject Review was replaced by the Institutional Audit which implements a light touch review method (Harvey, 2005), and focuses less on direct assessment of academic teaching at the subject level and more on ensuring that the quality assurance systems of the institution are working effectively to maintain academic standards and quality (See Chapter 2). The first round of the QAA Institutional Audit operated from 2002-2003 to 2005-2006 (QAA, 2008b).

Considering that quality audit is a continuing process but uses different methods, such as Subject Review and Institutional Audit, this research first compared the perceived impact of Subject Review on the work of academics with the impact of the Institutional Audit to find out whether there was a perceived change regarding the impact of the audits on the work of academics. Another aim was find out whether the current quality audit process was perceived as closely related to the work of individual academics and whether the quality audit has changed the way academics actually conceptualise themselves.

### **2.4 Perceived Impact of the Subject Review**

My case study indicates that the Subject Review was perceived to have had a massive impact on the work of academics. A quarter of the respondents (16) who experienced Subject Review still recalled it. One perceived impact was making them

pay more attention to their programmes and improving their teaching. For example, a respondent in charge of a medical school described the dramatic impact of the Subject Review that he experienced:

*... (Subject Review) It had a very big impact. It made us rethink a large amount of what we did with our programmes, particularly the (\*\*\*) programmes.... Because we are going to be assessed in a number of different areas, and we had to write the self-assessment document, so we had to carefully think about what we did and how we did it and how we organized it. We had a whole list of approach that affect student learning. And this was going to be externally assessed. It may be just revisit and rethink everything we did and it exposed a lot very poor practice, which we had to correct before the assessor arrived....Very very positive, I think. Lots of work, very stressful, lot of colleagues didn't like it, but it improves the quality of what we do quite substantially, I think. ...A very good idea. Personally, I wish we still had Subject Review.... (Respondent 2)*

From the words of Respondent 2, one can see that he perceived Subject Review as not only important in improving the academics' teaching, but also a cause of the heavy workload of academics. Another respondent in charge of undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Science also emphasized the importance of Subject Review and lamented at the replacement of Subject Review by the Institutional Audit:

*Subject Review I think was very good. ...It made people come into your subject area to see how you did. I am sorry that it is going. Very sorry to see Subject Review go, because I thought it was very good. (Respondent 4)*

It is quite evident that both Respondent 4 and 5 are strong supporters of Subject Review because of its significant impact on improving the work of academics. Three other respondents shared a similar view on the positive impact of Subject Review. All five respondents were in or were used to being in management positions. Similarly, the literature suggests that Subject Review did achieve some significant positive effects. For instance, increased institutional attention has since been paid toward teaching and learning because of the external assessment. There was also an increased awareness of the importance and increased practice of good teaching (Brennan *et al.*, 1997; Dill, 2001), and there were more active discussions and co-operation within academic units and a more clarified responsibility on the part of

academics to improve their teaching and student learning. Finally, there was a provision for better information being decimated on best practice by academics (Dill, 2001). My case study also indicated that the tight control of Subject Review increased workload among respondents and produced the impression that auditing was a form of power control. The Subject Review was compulsory, and academics had to undergo the review process and spend time preparing for their review. Eleven respondents who experienced Subject Review confirmed that aspect. The control view is identical with the argument offered by Shore & Wright (2000) that the audit was a form of power control and was closely related to the work of individual academics.

However, respondents in this case study perceived themselves as professionals and asserted loyalty to their disciplines. They only accepted the standards and practices agreed as good and defensible by professionals in their own discipline community (See Section 3.1 this chapter). This loyalty, together with the increased workload caused by the Subject Review (Kinman & Jones, 2003) caused academics to resist the tight control of Subject Review (Morley, 2003). There was growing resentment in the university system toward Subject Review (Kogan & Hanney, 2000). As a result, the QAA changed its audit method and began to rely on the Institutional Audit alone. It uses a light touch review to reduce the workload of academics (QAA, 2008 b). An analysis of the interview data reveals that although the Institutional Audit has replaced Subject Review, the Institutional Audit still has had a lasting effect on the work of respondents in the case study university. However, it is hard to tell whether this effect is passed on by Subject Review or not. There is an indication that the quality audit did work as a symbolic regulation of the work of the respondents.

## **2.5 Symbolic Regulation of the Quality Audit**

The perceived symbolic regulation of the quality audit is detectable from two main

evidentiary sources. The first source is that some of the quality assurance mechanisms studied were in effect optional, and many respondents found it easy to ignore that mechanism. Another example is peer observation. Although the case study university expected that academics would pay attention to peer observation and would take part in it regularly, peer observation was voluntary procedure in most departments/schools. One-third of respondents revealed that many academics in their departments had not been peer observed in the past three years, from 2003 to 2006, (See Section 2.2 Chapter 9). Thus peer observation had little real impact on the work of respondents. The optional practice of quality assurance mechanisms did not make respondents feel that it was compulsory to take part in a quality audit. As for the external examining system, that was established long before the QAA and is still a peer-to-peer system (See Section 2.2 Chapter 2).

Except for the optional nature of certain quality assurance mechanisms, the inconsistent implementation of quality assurance mechanisms within the department/school, such as annual programme reviews and the 2005 NSS, also suggests that quality audit does have a symbolic regulatory role. To be specific, nearly half of the respondents had little knowledge of the annual programme review (See Section 3.1 in Chapter 9). Similarly, the majority of respondents below the level of the department/school head knew little of the 2005 NSS (See Section 3.1 Chapter 8). The inconsistent implementation of quality assurance mechanisms suggests that respondents did not pay much attention to these mechanisms and did not take the quality audit seriously. There are other examples as well to suggest that quality audit worked as a symbolic regulation of the work of respondents. For example, the majority of respondents showed no interest in programme specification and subject benchmarking statements. Many ignored these mechanisms. Their ignorance implies that the quality audit could not always regulate what respondents did.

Take peer observation for example. Although it is closely related to teaching, very few respondents were willing to take part in the observation process unless their

department/school had fixed the observation conveniently for them. Three out of seven departments/schools that were studied admitted that peer observation was new in their departments/schools, in spite of the fact that it was informally long established during the process of Subject Review. Moreover one-third of respondents showed a resistance to peer observation because they perceived it as driven by the quality audit and used for promotion purposes instead of improving the quality of teaching. Respondents' resistance suggests that they did not feel obliged to obey the requirements of the quality audit, although on some occasions they would adjust slightly to meet its requirements when necessary.

A further analysis of the interview data suggests that when the quality audit works as a symbolic regulation, its impact on the work of respondents' still varied. Respondents' attitudes toward the audit varied depending on the length of their years working, their position, and their subjects taught. Comparatively speaking, respondents in their early career stage appeared to spend less time worrying about the audit and had less knowledge of the quality audit than did other respondents. However, the majority of respondents in their early career well knew about peer observation and student course evaluation and took these two mechanisms seriously. They depended on these mechanisms for promotional input. In contrast, most respondents in the middle and late stages of their academic careers did not think peer observation could ever influence their teaching significantly.

Management academic respondents in general had more knowledge of the quality audit processes and showed a greater positive attitude toward the quality audit than did academic respondents. For example, all fifteen academic managers knew about the quality audit, and eight broadly accepted the audit and regarded it as an important practice. However, only ten of fifty-nine academics found the quality audit useful or relevant for their own work. The more supportive attitude of academic managers toward the quality audit is due to the fact that these managers make decisions on change and are aware that quality audit outcomes could influence the reputation of

their institution. They had the responsibility to implement the quality assurance mechanisms successfully.

My respondents came from seven different disciplines, and their response to quality audit varied slightly with their disciplines. Respondents from social science- related disciplines and philosophical courses were more critical of quality audit, while respondents from medical- related courses held slightly more positive attitudes toward quality audit. Respondents in medical courses had indeed been regulated by professional bodies long before the quality audit, so perhaps they found it easier to cope with the requirements of the audit than did the respondents from the other disciplines. Respondents had various reactions toward the audit and that variation suggests that the quality audit works only as symbolic regulation and respondents feel they are free to deal with the audit in different ways.

## **2.6 Lasting, but Limited, Impact of the Quality Audit on Academics**

The interview data indicates that although respondents had different responses toward the symbolic regulation of quality audit, the audit had a lasting impact on the university as an organization, more so than on academic work itself and for two main reasons. First, the first round of the QAA Institutional Audit happened shortly after Subject Review, so there was the lasting influence of the Subject Review on the work of academics during the Institutional Audit process. Secondly, many internal quality assurance mechanisms within the university were set up during the Subject Review. These mechanisms existed then and were well equipped and developed during the Institutional Audit to assure the quality of teaching within the institution.

However, because of the light touch review methods of the Institutional Audit, the impact of the quality audit on the work of academics appeared to decrease when compared with that of the Subject Review. For example, a senior administrator

interpreted the replacement of Subject Review by an Institutional Audit as both good and bad. She expressed her concern that the light touch review by the Institutional Audit was less concerned with quality at the subject level:

*...On one hand, I can see Subject Review did enable culture change. It has enormous impact, but the problem about it was it was enormously bureaucratic.... I can't say I believe it should continued, because it was taking away academic time from what they are here to do, which is to research and teach...Because now that the Subject Review visits have finished, we have really few opportunities to really work with academic departments...because for Subject Review, everybody knows what they have to do and quite good at it, being prepared for it,... but the audit we have is moving further away from looking at quality at subject level. That's ok, but ... actually, in my opinion, there is less opportunity for the institutions to know what is exactly happening than we have Subject Review.... (Respondent 53)*

What Respondent 53 implied is that the Subject Review focused on checking the teaching at the subject level, so it produced better internal quality processes to manage teaching at the university than did the quality audit which adopted light touch review methods. An analysis of university documents reveals that there are two main activities related to the university assurance procedure in a quality audit: Annual programme review and regular visits to departments by faculty-based quality assurance teams. Not many respondents found these activities a useful practice to their teaching, confirming the view of Respondent 53 that the current quality audit process made it more difficult for managers to use the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the university. The quality audit still appeared to have limited impact on the work of respondents, partly because of the culture change produced by the Subject Review, in spite of the light touch review method used for the current audit.

The interview data suggests that one perceived limited effect of the quality audit was on curriculum. The majority of respondents who were not in vocational/professional programmes did not regard quality audit as important in improving their curricula significantly. Another perceived limited effect was on the power relations between academics and students. Respondents in general did not think that a quality audit

played a vital role in changing this power relation, although student course evaluation had made academics more responsive to the needs of students (See Chapter 9 Section 1.3).

In spite of the limited impact of the quality audit, there is evidence that one third of respondents adopted positive attitudes toward the quality audit and found it important and helpful to their working practice in two major ways: Increasing awareness of good teaching and improving undergraduate teaching practice. These positive effects suggest that the process of quality audit was perceived in general as useful, although with some specific limitations.

### **2.6.1 Perceived Increased Awareness of Good Teaching**

One fifth of respondents admitted that they had paid more attention to teaching, because the quality audit increased the possibility to reflect upon their teaching, made them spend more time thinking about the aims and objectives of their teaching and as result improved their teaching practice. For example, a female director of quality assurance on a Science faculty argued that the records required by quality audit could increase the awareness of good teaching because it helped academics reflect on their teaching:

*I would say that paper trail reflects teaching.... It is the job of the teaching committee to make sure that what is delivered is what is described and through peer observation, we can check whether that is happening. Through the student questionnaires, if there is anything missing and those students say so and we would pick it up that way. (Respondent 8)*

What Respondent 8 implied was that the paperwork for the quality audit was important, especially the peer observation and student course evaluation because academics would make changes accordingly. A further analysis of the interview data reveals that another reason for the perceived increased awareness of good teaching was that a quality audit kept academics on their toes. For example, a teaching fellow



in the Social Science Department articulated that the external check of quality in the audit increased academics' awareness to perform well:

*(Long pause) I think most things will be done better ... when they (academics) know that ... someone is checking. (Pause) if you are going to clean the fridge, ... for example, when you know that someone is going to check, so you might do it, not just flush the dust, ... you know someone is checking and marking on it, ... and you might lose your job, if you don't do it well, (laughter) then do a better job. (Respondent 49)*

What Respondent 49 implied was that academics might increase their awareness of performing well when they knew that someone from outside was observing them. This conclusion implies that an external check could be useful for academics because not all academic teaching was good. The finding differs from the argument by Power (1994, 1997) that the external check of an audit can be seen as problematic for professionals, because the checks for a quality audit can only sometimes increase respondents' awareness to perform in a better professional way.

A male lecturer in an Engineering department in this case study shared the view that the quality audit increased awareness of good teaching practice and pointed out that quality audit might have made academics feel pressured, but was still a good thing because the audit helped increase academics' reflection on teaching, in spite of the fact that it did take time for academics to improve their teaching practices:

*Through quality audit, you find out something ... that is problem this year, but you don't fix it up till next year. ... or sometimes it has to wait a couple of years until we change the curriculum, ... or the programme structure again, ... so it is quite slow process. And it makes difficult to ... judge how good it is, or to ... how feel good about it, so ... most people still feel it is a little bit of pain, but we have learned to live with it ... in many ways, and ... overall, I think it is a good thing ... in the end, because it makes you think harder ... about what you do. (Respondent 31)*

The above comments from respondents in this case study suggest that a very slight change of culture has occurred among academics because of the quality audit, which is a similar finding as the argument of Shore & Wright (2000) that audit produced a culture shift. One-fifth of respondents (12) in the first phase interviews were more

aware of the quality audit, and it did increase their awareness to teach better. That increased awareness is one achievement of the quality audit, and identical with the argument of Brennan *et al.* (1997) and Dill (2001), namely that increased attention has been paid to teaching as a result of external audit assessments worldwide, especially in regards to the quality of teaching.

### **2.6.2 Perceived Improved Teaching Practice**

Except for a perceived increased awareness of good teaching, there was an argument among one-third of the respondents (20) that a quality audit helped improve undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Quality audit implemented standards for teaching, got rid of bad teaching practices, and took student coursework seriously. For example, the Head of School in an Arts Department argued that quality audit was important in implementing minimum standards for teaching:

*Well, I suppose for many people, the impact will be on matters of ... details... so, err, if one gets questionnaire response thing, certain part of the courses will be more difficult than others that quickly go through and typically staff will take that into consideration of the plan for... the course of the next year, so that might be the level of detail. At the global level, I think that ... it has helped us to make a bit more sensitive to teaching quality issues which generally means ... that nobody thinks it satisfactory to go and give a completely unprepared lecture that is badly organized and so forth. It has implemented the minimum standards for all teaching. (Respondent 11)*

Together with the provision of minimum teaching standards, the quality audit was perceived as useful in getting rid of bad teaching practices because not all teaching was good and some did need to be improved. A female teaching fellow in a Social Science Department argued that quality audit encouraged teachers to keep instruction material in the case study university up to date:

*I think, without the scrutiny (of audit), ... I think people would be ... very.... What is the word? I am thinking of,...would be very laid back... about their teaching. They would take the programme ...off the shelf and deliver it again. ... I am sure that a lot of people in this university ... deliver very old material. You know that is not up to date. We should try to keep ... all our materials up to date, the current*

*policy, the current practice. ...It is our responsibility ... to keep ourselves up to date today. (Respondent 48)*

Respondent 48 implies here that a quality audit stopped some academics from using out-of-date teaching materials, so their teaching became more current. Except for teaching material, other minor changes came out of the audit process, including the use of high technology, improved feedback to students, and improved teaching style. A professor in a Social Science Department pointed out that academics began to give students more feedback because of the quality audit:

*... I think, most of the quality assurance, ... in principle, the changes we made, ... have been good, so there is much more ... written feedback to ... students... than they would receive in the past. Although it can be quite burdensome, so for example, if the students give a presentation, ... you know, ten years ago, they give a presentation and that is it. Now, we are required to ... provide a written set of comment ... on the presentation. .... You have to make sure that... these written comments are provided and that takes a bit of time. ...In the same way, 20 years ago, when I was... a student, and I got my essays back, there were a few scribbles of comments on the bottom. ... It is much more precise ... checklist and process. That can also sometimes be burdensome, but I think, ... in principle, it is a good thing. (Respondent 42)*

What Respondent 42 suggested was that although a quality audit could be burdensome because of the large amount of paperwork, the audit actually made academics perform better, particularly in providing better course comments to students. About one- third of respondents shared this view and argued that the quality audit made them become more systematic toward student coursework, which then improved their teaching.

The perceived increased awareness of teaching and improved teaching practice described by the respondents suggest that although the light touch review of the quality audit focuses on checking internal quality assurance mechanisms, and although academics did show resistance to some aspects of earlier quality audit processes, for example, the Subject Review, some quality assurance mechanisms still have had lasting impact on the work of academics. This impact is due to the fact that

institutionalized pressure for a quality audit increased the possibility that individual academics would reflect on critiques of their teaching and make improvements. The perceived changes in teaching and also the awareness of teaching style imply that the quality audit has produced a slight culture shift among respondents on how to teach well and better. One-third of respondents indeed adopted positive attitudes toward the audit and found it to be both important and helpful to their working practice. However, that culture shift during the period of the Institutional Audit appears to be less massive than the cultural shift produced by the Subject Review.

Considering the fact that the quality audit was perceived by the respondents to have affected their work in both positive and negative ways, this research decided to explore whether respondents had actually changed how they conceptualized themselves during the audit process. The research also examined the reasons for respondents' resistance to the quality audit other than the reasons that the quality audit created additional workload for academics. During the analysis of the first phase interviews, three terms-- professional, distrust, and bureaucracy-- appeared frequently in responses. In order to identify the relationship between quality audit and these three terms, second phase interviews were conducted with thirty academics. These thirty respondents were gathered by emailing the original sixty-four academics from the first phase interviews, but just under half responded. I found that the resistance of academics to the quality audit was related to a perceived tension between quality audit and the respondents' belief that they were professionals.

### **Section Three: Tension between Academics as Professionals and the Nature of a Quality Audit**

All thirty respondents in the second phase interviews held the unanimous view that they were professionals. A bit more than half (16) argued that a tension existed between the nature of a quality audit and their perception that academics were

professionals. These respondents held slightly different attitudes toward the quality audit in the first phase interviews. To be more specific, fourteen of these sixteen argued against the quality audit, while only one supported the audit and only one held mild attitudes toward the concept. (See Table 3 below) The tension between the nature of the quality audit and academic work seen as a profession was caused by three main factors: The time cost of the audit procedure, the bureaucracy of the audit, and the audit's distrust of academics.

In contrast, the other half of these respondents (14) in the second phase interviews argued that as long as the audit scrutiny was logical and not too burdensome, they did not see any tension between the quality audit and their notion of being professionals because they felt that regular review and self-evaluation was part of their professional activity, and as professionals they should be accountable to students and accountable to the use of public money, for example, their salary. These fourteen respondents all also presented positive attitudes toward the quality audit in the first phase interviews. Of these respondents, six were manager academics, one was a teaching fellow, two were professors, and five were lecturers. (See Table 4 below)

**Table 3: Number of respondents Asserted Tension between Quality Audit (QA) and their Professionalism, and number of those held Various Attitudes toward the Quality Audit in First Phase Interviews (N=16)**

Respondents' position	Opposing QA	Mild attitude toward QA	Supporting QA
Academic Manager	4	1	1
Lecturer	8	0	0
Professor	2	0	0

**Table 4: Position of respondents' Showing Positive Attitude toward Quality Audit in First Phase Interviews (N=14)**

Respondent Position	Supportive Attitudes toward Quality Audit
Manager	6
Teaching Fellow	1
Professor	2
Lecturer	5

### **3.1 Academic work as a Profession**

Although all thirty respondents to the study perceived themselves as professionals in the second phase interviews, their interpretation of being a professional did vary. On most occasions, respondents who worked in a subject accredited by a professional body normally took being professional to mean being recognized by a professional body or being a member of that body. However, the other respondents who worked in nonprofessional subjects interpreted academic work as a profession in six ways:

1. The nature of the job is non manual;
2. The job has standards and practices agreed as good and defensible by professionals in the same discipline community (high level of education and qualification/degree, and regular training in proper procedures);
3. They possess the ability to do their job efficiently and effectively (skills, high level expertise in their subject field, and a specialist role);
4. They conduct themselves with acceptable behavior for the promotion/development of their chosen discipline (adherence to standards; conscientious workmanship to known standards, enacting the principles embodied in the codes of their profession to ensure that one meets the high standards expected in their work);

5. They work ethically (a matter of attitude: treating students appropriately, commitment to standards and rules of the profession, responsibility to students and to the development of knowledge);
6. They have academic freedom (determine their own work practice), have peer governance, and have autonomy.

Most respondents combined more than one of the features above when they described themselves as professionals. The most widely accepted features were three: Academics possess skills that require a high level of education and high qualifications; academics are committed to standards and rules set by their subject/discipline fields; and academics have the freedom to determine their own work practice with peer governance. The high level of education and high qualifications indicates that academic work has a knowledge base that requires a lengthy period of education (Wilson, 1979). The commitment to standards and rules set by their subject/discipline fields is one of the principles embodied in the codes of the profession to ensure that academic professionals meet the high standards expected in their work (Freidson, 2001).

The view that academic work is a profession was not only well supported by my respondents, but also by academic researcher, such as, Halsey (1992), Henkel (2000), Millet (1967), and Wilson (1979). Wilson (1979) holds to three strong arguments for academic work as profession. One is that university is the seedbed of the traditional professions, for example, law and medicine. The second argument is that the professional ethos for academics has deep roots. The third is that academic work has attributes of traditional professions, such as, special expertise, moral integrity, and control over who practices the professional. These attributes are raised and discussed by Freidson (2001), Johnson (1972), and Larson (1977).

However, my interview data revealed that one important feature of traditional professional work was not in academic (only in respect to teaching) -- providing

expert service to clients. Most respondents in the case study university did not support the concept of expert service in their work. That concept refers to the complex, theoretical, and specialized knowledge that is applied to the problems of clients, employers, or customers (Freidson, 2001; Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977). One reason for this view was the difficulty in defining the clients/ customers of academics. The majority of respondents in this case study refused to treat students as customers because of their perception that higher education was not a product and because they knew more about the subject than their students did. This view suggests that although respondents perceived their work as a profession, their refusal to treat students as clients/ customers made their academic work distinctive and separate from the more traditional professions. It needs to be made clear that when this study explored academic work as a profession, the research only analyzed it from a teaching aspect without consideration of research effort. Whether the notion of expert service can be applied to research is a completely different topic and outside the scope of this research.

Except for the notion of expert service, academic work has all the other attributes of a profession, such as special expertise, moral integrity, adherence to a code of practice, and control over who practices, all discussed by Freidson (2001), Johnson (1972), and Larson (1977). For example, academics have control over who practices because if one wants to become an academic that person normally needs to achieve a high level of post-school education and qualifications/degrees. To achieve this level of education, the individual has to apply to university as well as pass all kinds of exams. Academics have the right to decide which applicants are admitted to university and awarded degrees. In this way academics gain control over who practices as academics.

The adherence to code of practice in the case of academic work can be interpreted as a strong commitment to standards and rules set by their subject/discipline and a category that was the best supported among respondents. This commitment suggests



that academic work is a kind of authority within organizations, not only because academics manage their own teaching and research and manager academics deal with academic work, but also because of their recognition of a standard of conduct that governs the exercise of knowledge and skill (Wilson, 1979). There is an indication that the majority of respondents only accepted the standards of conduct enacted within their own disciplines, not from the outside, for example, from the QAA. The respondents asserted that they preferred to be checked and regulated by peers who knew their subjects/ disciplines, like external examiners, but not assessors from the QAA. They regarded these assessors as non-professionals. For example, a male lecturer responsible for quality assurance in an Art Department offered examples to illustrate why assessors for the QAA were not professional:

*My opinion is ... they are incapable ... of assessing ... quality of teaching, because the way the things ... were set up. I mean we spend long hours ... writing documents ... and we had this room ... full of documents and when ... people come in, they said: 'Most of them aren't reading documents.' (Pause) They don't necessarily know ... what is happening, although ... they do sit on some classes. (Respondent 55)*

What Respondent 55 implies is that some assessors of the QAA do not take the documents prepared by academics seriously. That lack made academics feel that their work was not respected. Another reason for the dislike of the QAA assessors was that the assessors were not perceived as having solid knowledge of the assessed subjects. Ten other respondents shared the view of Respondent 55. This finding suggests that respondents tended to treat the QAA assessors and their assessments as non-professional because the respondents believed their authority was derived from a disciplined- based professionalism, also analyzed by Dearlove (1997). Therefore, when the quality audit challenged respondents' assumptions and values about being professionals, they felt that the audit challenged their notion of being professionals and thus the academics chose to ignore or show resistance to the quality audit. This ignorance and resistance confirmed that there was tension between the quality audit and academics' notion of being professionals. An analysis of the interview data suggests that this perceived tension is caused mainly by the time cost of the audit

procedure, the bureaucracy of the audit, and the audit's distrust of academics. Time cost of the quality audit appeared to be the strongest reason for the tension.

### **3.2 Time cost of Quality Audit Procedures**

Half of the respondents in the second phase interviews argued against the time cost of the quality audit procedure. For example, a male lecturer in a Science school explained that the priority of academics was research or teaching, and they did not want to spend time doing quality audit tasks:

*The only real conflict I see is time - time to ensure that quality audit is satisfied is time potentially lost to other professional duties. (Respondent 37)*

What Respondent 37 implied here was that the quality audit was burdensome, and the time academics spent in preparing for the audit could be used for research and teaching. This viewpoint corresponds with a finding in my first phase interview that one reason for respondents' regarding the quality audit as burdensome was that the majority of respondents treated quality audit-related job as administrative jobs and not their priority (See Chapter 7).

Another reason why respondents perceived the process of quality audit as time consuming was the different perceptions of standards between respondents and the quality audit. What a quality audit viewed as good practice might be different from the judgment of academics. For example, the quality audit uses an administrative measure to judge the quality of teaching and learn of the university, while respondents perceived that measure as simply paperwork. A male lecturer in a Science faculty explained that the administrative exercise of the quality audit was opposed to the professionalism of academics:

*... Quality audit might suggest that we can meet standards with less effort, but a sense of professionalism might dictate that we continue to put a lot of energy into producing a 'top end' but inefficient educational product..... Quality audit can rapidly become an administrative exercise, i.e. simply a way of formalising on paper what is being guided by our own professionalism anyway. It then serves to*

*add to stress and divert energy from activities that are more deserving of our highly qualified input.... (Respondent 29)*

What Respondent 29 implied is that although a quality audit uses light touch review methods to regulate the quality of teaching, academics did not accept the standards set by the audit because they had different ways of interpreting quality of teaching. They did not perceive a quality audit as really measuring quality, but more as a procedure for academics to fill in forms and a waste of time for academics. Half of the respondents in the second phase interviews shared the view of Respondent 29 and showed some resentment to the time cost of doing audit paperwork. They held the argument that as professionals they would like to control their own work instead of being told to do typical boring paper work that did not benefit their teaching and research, but only created tension and was conflictive with their notion of professionalism. This tension, according to Freidson (2001), is because professionals like to use the notion of professionalism as a unique form of occupational control and to promote and facilitate their own occupational changes without interference. It seems that professionals like to gain control of their work for better practice, instead of being told to do paperwork that they view as useless for constructive occupational change.

### **3.3 Bureaucracy of the Quality Audit**

The second major cause for a perceived tension between the quality audit and respondents' professionalism is the alleged bureaucracy of the audit. According to Max Weber, bureaucracy originally had a technical and neutral meaning and was 'the means of transforming social actions into rationally organized action' (Roth, G. & Wittich, C., 1968, p. 987). This definition suggests that bureaucracy originally was meant to be an efficient system of administration with impersonal recruitment and run as a hierarchy, using a set of precisely written rules.

### 3.3.1 Bureaucracy: Perceptions of the Respondents

These respondents from this university case study perceived bureaucracy differently from Max Weber. Many respondents used bureaucracy for pejorative reasons and usually related the term to the quality audit. One example is that respondents used bureaucracy/bureaucratic as a label for actions/tasks they did not want to do. Respondents also associated bureaucracy with administrative support of a department/faculty/university; an excess of paperwork; the necessity to conform to regulations that simply took up time that would be better spent on teaching and research; excessive adherence to rules or standards and less autonomy for those involved; and a legalization for academics to formalize rules and bureaucratize ways they must deal with students.

Nearly half of the respondents in the second phase of interviews used bureaucracy/bureaucratic interchangeably as a label for tasks they did not want to do, such as peer observation, a quality audit, and administrative jobs. Take peer observation for example. It is anything but bureaucratic because it does not involve hierarchy. However, according to Watson (2003), bureaucracy is originally related to hierarchy, a system of people or tasks/actions arranged in a graded order. In other words, bureaucracy is

*the control and co-ordination of work tasks through a hierarchy of appropriately qualified office holders, whose authority derives from their expertise and who rationally devise a system of rules and procedures that are calculated to provide the most appropriate means of achieving specified ends (Watson, 2003, p. 86).*

There is little evidence that peer observation creates a hierarchy between the observer and the observed in the case study university, although when peer observation was used for promotion purposes, there was perceived power present between the observer and those observed. However, on most occasions, peer observation only involves academics observing their peers' lectures and then offering suggestions on those as well as filling in the necessary forms, so there is no hierarchy

created there. It is a peer- to- peer process, instead of a bureaucratic one. Therefore, when respondents perceived peer observation as being bureaucratic, their notion of bureaucracy contradicted the original meaning of bureaucracy. Perceiving peer observation as a bureaucratic practice implies that respondents perceived bureaucracy differently from Weber and Watson and also that these respondents used bureaucracy/bureaucratic as a label for what they did not want to do. A head of school confirmed this viewpoint and asserted he was not surprised that academics showed resistance to peer observation because they showed a similar resistance to the other quality assurance mechanisms:

*Sure, my experience is that anything, any other bureaucracy which imposed on them (academics) to do and that consumes their time is resisted. It is not necessarily peer observation. It may be some other forms of quality assurance, whatever it is. Maybe they are required to do some form of internal audit, or fulfill in the questionnaire or whatever. Anything takes time is resisted because we have a huge amount of work. (Respondent 13)*

What Respondent 13 implied is that academics use the term bureaucracy to resist what they do not like, and they referred the term “bureaucracy” to those bureaucrats who imposed quality assurance mechanisms and a quality audit. Therefore, the label not only applies to peer observation, but also to some administrative jobs. For example, an administrator in Engineering made the view explicit:

*When academics talk about 'bureaucracy', they usually mean admin tasks which they see as unnecessary, usually imposed by the university or outside bodies rather than the department. Quality assurance is a good example. If it involves a lot of paperwork, the typical response of academics is to say 'we are spending so much time on the paperwork, we don't have enough time to deliver the quality' or 'the questions being asked don't measure real quality' or just 'you don't understand our situation'.... (Respondent 7)*

Respondent 7 means here that academics tend to use bureaucracy to refer to administrative tasks and paperwork that they have no interest in addressing. Nearly half of the respondents in the second phase interviews shared this view and equated bureaucracy with their unwanted administrative jobs which involved repetitive work and box ticking exercise. One implication of the perceived bureaucracy of the quality

audit is that respondents disliked the quality audit and regarded it as a paper exercise. This dislike corresponds with the finding in Section 2 of this chapter where only one-third of respondents found the quality audit useful and important to their work. The other two-thirds of respondents showed doubts about the quality audit and expressed resistance to it.

### **3.3.2 Different attitudes of Respondents toward Bureaucracy**

Most academic respondents showed a strong resentment toward bureaucracy in their work environment. In contrast, nearly half of administrators and academic managers in the second phase interviews articulated that bureaucracy was a necessity to completing the work of academics, especially when they were working in an age of quality audits. Two quotations give a flavor of the respondents' different attitudes toward bureaucracy. A female senior lecturer in a Social Science department was unusual in her strong resentment of the audit bureaucracy:

*...the QAA...are bureaucrats, ... because each year they change the forms. They change it every year because someone has to justify their existence. ... And that makes more work for us ... and more time. The university admin does the same. ... It takes out massive amount of money... from the department and they produce nothing for the university. They don't teach. They don't research and they don't do anything, but they create endless paperwork, you know, and they do that, I know, in part, because of pressure from ... QAA or from whoever outside, but they seem to bend backward ... and generate ... their own bureaucrats to make more paper work, so there is bureaucracy ... at all different kind of levels (Respondent 45).*

It is noticeable here that Respondent 45 hated the bureaucracy of the quality audit and described it as a way to justify the existence of bureaucrats. This resentment suggests that the respondents were bored with the long process of a quality audit, so they termed tasks related to the quality audit as bureaucratic. However, nearly half of academic manager respondents held different views and argued that some academics overstated the time they spent in completing documents requested by the quality audit. For example, a female senior manager in Social Science studies pointed out

that not all academics were required to fill out documents related to a quality audit because it was normally administrators who dealt with these audit-related tasks and even when some academics were required to fill in forms, it did not take them very long to finish them:

*Well, ... the minimum document, the unit outline, is actually nothing to be honest. It is not a big deal. I wouldn't want that to be a big deal... (Respondent 33)*

Respondent 13 did not perceive the bureaucracy of a quality audit as a serious problem for her academic colleagues. Her view was shared by five other academic manager respondents who confirmed that although not all the academics had audit-related jobs, some of their academic colleagues used the word 'bureaucracy' as a self-defensive mechanism to avoid being asked to do unwanted jobs. For example, a male senior manager in an Arts department confirmed that the quality audit was not the main cause of bureaucracy; yet academics always labeled things required by quality audit as bureaucracy:

*... Bureaucracy is a pejorative term for 'formalised administrative procedures'; in academic usage, .... In some cases, virtually all administration is so labelled. ...Possible examples of things which my colleagues might label as bureaucracy; Annual Programme Review ...; the process for approving new optional units, ...; the paperwork surrounding the training and mentoring of new staff. In general, it is the 'audit culture', that requires that everything should be written down, minuted, and approved by a range of people. (Respondent 17)*

It is evident that Respondent 17 felt some academics exaggerated the bureaucracy of the quality audit. This exaggeration suggests that although the bureaucracy of a quality audit was perceived as one cause for the tension between the quality audit and respondents' notion of professionalism, the interpretation of bureaucracy depended on the position of the respondents and also on which side of the fence respondents sat. Generally speaking, the respondents who held a more understanding attitude toward bureaucracy were those who perceived the quality audit in a positive way. For instance, academic manager respondents held a milder attitude toward the perceived bureaucracy than did their academic colleagues.

In spite of the respondents' different understanding of and different attitudes toward bureaucracy, the word "bureaucracy" is still widely used by respondents from the case study university. The widespread use of bureaucracy has two implications. One is that higher education institutions are not bureaucracy free because in all institutions there are mixtures of collegial, academic-based decision-making, and bureaucratic/hierarchical work. The 'collegial work is not simply a coming together of peers, but is itself structured into hierarchical and bureaucratic formats,' so 'a lot of decision making process will inevitably become bureaucratized' (Kogan, 1999, p. 270-271). The other implication is that respondents disliked the quality audit and perceived it as a conflict with their professionalism, so they showed ongoing resistance to the audit and its bureaucracy. It is important for both the senior management teams in universities and the QAA to explore and address the problematization of bureaucratic management within the quality audit process, so there can be increased understanding of the purpose of the quality audit from academics.

### **3.4 Distrust of academics by the Quality Audit**

The interview data suggests that the third cause for the perceived tension between quality audit and the respondents' notion of professionalism was the distrust of quality audit present in academics. About one-third of respondents in the second phase interviews articulated that they distrusted the external check of the quality audit and that this external check is a sign that quality audit does not trust academics. They showed an objection to this external check because as professionals they did not like being subjected to any external scrutiny. This objection suggests that these respondents believed that as professionals they were competent enough to think about and solve problems that fell in their own domain, so trust should be placed on their professionalisms, instead of their being checked and assessed by people from the outside, i.e., the QAA.



The perceived distrust raised by respondents is not new in the literature. Martin Trow (1993) was among the first to associate the development of external quality assessment with a withdrawal of trust in the academic community. Similarly Eraut (1994) lamented that professional bodies used to exist to protect the public from unqualified non-professionals, for example, 'quack' doctors, but now these professional bodies also function to protect the public from the professionals because the routines of the professionals are also subjected to scrutiny. What Trow (1993) and Eraut (1994) imply is that academics sense a decline of trust in their professional conduct and worry that academics are losing their authoritative power because of the external check of their professionalism through the quality audit.

However, the interview data does suggest that not all respondents felt distrusted by the quality audit. There was a perception among nearly half of respondents (ten academic respondents and four manager academic respondents) in the second phase interview that meeting the requirements of the quality audit is a matter of accountability, not distrust. These respondents argued that a regular review and self-evaluation should become part of academic activity and it was time for academics to learn how to prove they were doing their jobs properly. For example, a senior lecturer in an Engineering department argued that academics should change their biased attitudes toward the quality audit:

*I think it is a case of developing the right attitude, and learning to negotiate. Developing the right attitude means you have to stop thinking of quality assurance as doing unpleasant paperwork when asked, to try to prove that you are doing your job properly. Instead, you have to think about changing your everyday procedures so that the quality of what you do gets recorded, in a way you can demonstrate on demand, with as little extra effort as possible. (Respondent 9)*

Respondent 9 was understanding of the task involved in the quality audit and encouraged academics to adopt a negotiating attitude toward the audit. This understanding and cooperative attitude suggests that the quality audit has produced a slight culture shift among respondents regarding how to perceive the audit and also

how to cooperate with the audit. There was an indication that this culture shift also happens in regard to how respondents conceptualize their own professional behaviour. For instance, there was increased accountability awareness among them. Five academic respondents and four manager academic respondents argued that academics should become accountable for their funding and their salaries. A lecturer as well as a senior manager in a medical course laughed at the idea that the quality audit distrusted academics. He argued strongly that academics should become accountable to the public for money because they received funding and were being paid to do their work:

*The academic felt distrusted? Good excuses for not doing anything. I am sorry, but I have little sympathy with that.... Maybe I shouldn't name it, but what, the XXX colleges..., which for many years, were purely private universities and recently get some money from the government for the students? Little about five years ago, it came into the HEFCE and the QAA mechanisms. Therefore they had a Subject Review. Subject Review stopped, but they just come in so they still went through the process. I thought it quite funny, because they were talking to their principal, complaining bitterly about this intrusion into looking what they do. And I listened to him over dinner complaining bitterly about this and found that simple. Don't take their money. (Respondent 2)*

What Respondent 2 argued here was that since the HEFCE provided funding to academics and universities, academics should become accountable for the funding. This increased accountability awareness, in the words of Walden (1996), stems from the demand for higher education institutions to become accountable for their use of public resources. The quest for greater accountability to the public penetrates the lives of academics in England. Eight other respondents from the case study university held a similar view of accountability as Respondent 2. They argued that being accountable should become an essential part of academic work. For example, a female senior manager in Social Science argued strongly that academics should become accountable for public money, at least for their salaries:

*...We should be accountable to somebody, because we are paid the public money. This is the basic rule. We can't do whatever we want. We are paid actually not bad an amount of public money. We have enormous amount of freedom over our day. You know most academics haven't worked at anything for most of their life.... I think people who taking their salary but talk in gibberish and never responding to students and doing the sort of worst practice. I think you do need some system to find these to deal with them.... (Respondent 1)*

It is evident that Respondent 1 showed strong support for academics' becoming accountable for public money because of her perception that accountability could make academics more responsible to students. Five other academic respondents shared her view and argued also for the need of accountability. For example, a female lecturer in a Social Science department articulated that although being accountable meant that the workload of academics would increase to some degree, doing so would keep academics on their toes and prevent them from using the same teaching material:

*I think it is a good trend. (long pause) I think, it will ...err, ... I think it is tendency to ...keep back on your toes a little bit. ... Academics just keep repeating the same ... teaching material, ok, I think it will keep on their toes a little more. They won't be able to be, err, ... lazy is not quite ... the right word, but only to work and stay on some materials and ... making it interesting and ... not being floppy,... in all kinds of ways. (Respondent 19)*

What Respondent 19 suggested then is that being accountable would result in academics increasing their awareness of good teaching, and they would produce better lectures. This view reveals that there is increased awareness of accountability among respondents and a tendency for respondents to perceive being accountable as a common practice of their work. The increased awareness of accountability related to an increased awareness of good teaching, which could be perceived as changes produced by the quality audit. This change suggests that the quality audit has

produced a culture shift among half of the respondents in the second phase interviews. However this culture shift did not apply to the majority of respondents and thus could be understood as only a slight culture change. Moreover this culture shift has been undertaken through a long process from the Subject Review (1993-2001) to the Institutional Audit. This shift exemplifies how respondents perceived their teaching, how they perceived the quality audit, and how they perceived accountability. Except for this culture shift, the quality audit has challenged some of the respondents' values, for example, their notion of professionalism. The academics held a strong belief in professional authority in their specific subject/discipline areas. (See Section 3.1 this chapter). As a result, there was perceived tension between the quality audit and the respondents' notion of professionalism, confirming that when the quality audit works as an external check, it is perceived as a challenge to the academics' assumptions and values and has produced new norms of conduct and professional behaviour among many academics (Shore & Wright, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter analyzed and interpreted how respondents in the case study university perceived the impact of the quality audit on their work. It first compared the respondents' perception of internal quality assurance mechanisms with that of the external mechanism and determined that respondents in general showed a preference for the internal mechanisms. These mechanisms were more relevant to their work than were the external mechanisms. Then the chapter explored the respondents' perception of the quality audit as a whole and revealed that during the audit process, the case study university established several new internal quality assurance mechanisms to meet the requirements of the audit. Thus the quality audit was perceived as administrative control over the university. This administrative control issues was raised earlier and discussed by Power (1994, 1997).

Except for the view that the audit works as administrative control over the university, there was a perception among respondents that there was a power hierarchy between the QAA and the case study university. The higher education institutions in England are still undergoing the Institutional Audit by the QAA. The institutions have no choice but to prepare for the audit and produce paperwork to prove that their internal quality assurance mechanisms are working well enough to maintain the quality of teaching at the institution. Additionally, the result of the QAA Institutional Audit was perceived to have influenced the reputation of the case study university. This reputation influence, together with the institution's compliance with the requirements of the audit, made respondents sense there was an uneven power relation between the QAA and the case study university.

In spite of the perceived power hierarchy between the QAA and the case study university, there was a perception among respondents that quality audit processes worked as a form of symbolic regulation over their work and the same regulations was sometimes also true for the internal quality mechanisms. There are two reasons for this perceived symbolic regulation. First, some quality assurance mechanisms worked as optional practices in the case study university, for example, peer observation. The optional practice made respondents feel that it was not compulsory to take part in quality audit. Secondly, there was inconsistent implementation of the quality assurance mechanisms within the department/school; for example, nearly half of the respondents had little knowledge of the annual programme review process taking place in the institution and the majority of academic respondents knew little of the 2005 NSS. Such little knowledge of and ignorance of the quality assurance mechanisms suggests that respondents did not take the quality audit seriously, and the quality audit processes worked as a symbolic type of regulation over the work of the respondents. However, the respondents did present different attitudes toward the symbolic regulation of the quality audit. About one-third of respondents held supportive attitudes toward the quality audit and found the audit both important and

helpful to their working practice. The rest either ignored the quality audit or showed resistance to it. The various attitudes toward quality audit was related to their length of working years, their position, and their subjects. For example, academic manager respondents appeared to have more knowledge of the quality audit and paid more attention to the audit because they were the people who make decisions change and because the audit result could influence the reputation of the institution.

The case study completed for this research reveals that the whole process of quality audit measures is perceived to have achieved a certain amount of impact on the work done by academics. However, the effect of the QAA Institutional Audit process upon institutions, especially at the academic level appeared to decrease, when compared with the effect of the Subject Review, a previous audit method (1993-2001). This result is partly because the Institutional Audit adopted a lighter touch review method and partly because respondents showed a degree of resistance toward the quality audit. However, the quality audit still appeared to have some effect, although limited, on the work of academics, including increasing awareness of good teaching among respondents, maintaining currency of materials, and helping to improve undergraduate classroom teaching practices.

In spite of the positive changes produced by the quality audit, two-thirds of respondents in the first phase interviews ignored or showed resistance to a quality audit, partly because of the tension created by that audit with academics' professional authority. Respondents showed strong support for their own professionalism in their disciplinary domain, but their perception of academic work as a profession was different from the notion of traditional professions. Respondents indicated that academic work had a lack of expert service or the complex, theoretical, and specialized knowledge often applied to problems of clients, employers, or customers. It was hard to apply this expert service to the teaching efforts of respondents because the majority of academics did not perceive their students as customers or consumers.

Half of the respondents in the second phase interviews felt that there was tension between the quality audit and the respondents' notion of professionalism. The majority of these respondents showed resistance to or ignored the quality audit in the first phase interviews (See Table 3). Their perceived tension was caused by the time cost of a quality audit, the bureaucracy of a quality audit, and distrust of academics by those administering the quality audit. This tension suggests that the quality audit has challenged some traditional academic values that focus upon the respondents' subject/discipline fields where their professional authority is so strong that they do not like being checked and assessed by people from outside their fields. When academics were facing the external review process of the quality audit, especially the Institutional Audit of the QAA perceived as coming from the outside, the respondents constructed and used the discourse of professionalism to maintain and regain control of their subject/discipline.

In contrast, the other half of respondents in the second phase interviews asserted that they did not feel the tension between the quality audit and their notion of professionalism. They did not feel they were distrusted during the check and assessment of the quality audit. Instead they demonstrated an increased awareness of accountability. For instance, they regarded the regular review of the quality audit and any self-evaluation as part of their professional task. They also felt it important for academics to learn to become accountable to funding and salary because doing so helped this group of respondents provide better teaching to students. The increased awareness of accountability can be perceived as a slight culture change that was produced by the quality audit. Moreover, these respondents perceived the quality audit as having delivered its claimed benefits of an assured quality of teaching. This finding suggests that the culture change by the quality audit was indeed taking place, together with a smattering of new norms of conduct and professional behaviour. Although a similar culture shift has been taking place since the Subject Review, which was revealed and analyzed previously by Shore & Wright (2000), the current culture shift is not as dramatic as that alleged to the Subject Review. Some

predictions like those by Shore & Wright (2000) have not been realized because of the different light review methods and also the resistance of academics toward a quality audit.

The respondents' mixed views, both supportive and resistant, toward the quality audit are related to the idea that some respondents still strongly hold traditional values of collegiality that relate to academic autonomy and freedom (Dearlove, 1997). Those respondents in mid-to late career seemed to cherish the earlier time when a university was a self-governing community of scholars, even when their university was imbued with hierarchical forms of management, for example, new managerialism, which puts high emphasis on explicit management of core and support activities (Deem, 2004). The belief in such collegiality enabled respondents to hold on to an authority that they related to their professional status, training, experience, and disciplines. Two thirds of respondents believed that they should be free to manage their teaching without being directed by an outsider, for example, the QAA. These respondents defied any external regulation of quality audit and showed resistance to it. As a result, the quality audit became a symbolic regulation that controlled the work of respondents at the case study university.

This symbolic regulation by the quality audit raises a question as to whether the enormity of any quality audit operation, from the Institutional Audit to the Subject Review, has been justified because of its rather limited effect on academics, especially when considering that the case study university spent large amounts of money and energy to prepare for the audit, only to learn that the apparent impact of the quality audit was not obvious. Because this case study indicates that respondents indeed supported external examination which is less expensive with fewer resources involved, these audits can cause a change in academic work because of good citizenship between examiners and academics. Thus it might be a good idea to revise the quality audit system into a system where academics can take the lead. In other words, it might be beneficial to have external examining leads, instead of QAA leads.



Academics might be happier and show more interest in and get more involved with a quality audit process led by academics

Another thought is that it is important for the quality audit and the academic community to increase their levels of mutual understanding, in order to establish more cooperation in the process of quality audit and thereby achieve improved working practice. It is high time that the quality audit rethink its audit methods and reduce the perceived time cost of an audit, the perceived distrust of an audit toward academics, and the perceived bureaucracy of an audit. In that way, the quality audit will not be perceived as interfering with academic professionalism in related subjects and disciplines.

The third thought is that because professions often had to respond to external demands for changes in history, which could be political, economic, cultural and social (Johnson, 1972), a similar case might occur in the higher education sector if the institutions still have to rely heavily on government funding and if academics want to continue to have their work accepted as a profession and not merely a vocation (Weber, 1918) or a way of life (Hogan, 2003). Therefore, it is important for the academic community to learn to negotiate with the quality audit and redefine their views of professionalism in terms of their academic underlying commitments and purposes. Their professionalism should not only be defined in terms of status and self-regulation, but also in terms of values and practices which can benefit society as a whole.

As Nixon & Marks (2001) suggest, it is time for the academics to become a learning profession, in order to meet the needs of the community they serve because the changed context of the higher education sector, including marketisation and mass higher education, has produced a need for academic professionalism to be 'based not only on their ability to 'profess' their own professional values, but also on their capacity to receive and work with the values of others' (Nixon & Ranson, 1997,

p.207), such as parents, students, local and national communities. Therefore academics should operate as public intellectuals and their practice should remain open to differences, such as, difference of opinion and outlook and difference of cultural backgrounds and expectation, because their prime responsibility is to students, colleagues and the wider community.

According to Nixon & Marks (2001), the new professionalism should be both oppositional and self-critical, it should not only look beyond its own professional and institutional interests but also take a critical look at those interests and at the moral and political assumptions that underpin them. From the perspective of quality audit, by doing this, both government and the higher education institutions as well as academics can gain the best benefits from a quality audit process.

## Chapter 11: Conclusion of My Thesis

### Introduction

There are four main purposes for this chapter. First, to draw together my findings and explain how they have answered the research questions; secondly, to compare my research with previous research on quality audit processes, suggest in what way this research does something differently reveals any similarities and differences regarding the theoretical points made by Power (1994, 1997) and Wright & Shore (2000), and present the claims for contribution of my thesis; third, to reflect on the research process, the strength and limitations of this research and how I minimized those limitations; fourth and finally, to suggest areas for future research arising from what I have accomplished here.

### Section 1: Answers to the Research Questions

My single case study of a research-intensive pre-1992 university in England was carried out to answer three research questions, but divided into two phases: January 2006 – April 2006 and October 2006. The first phase focused on the two research questions listed below, while the second phase dealt with the third research question, also presented in this section:

***Research Question One:*** What perceived impact have the external quality assurance mechanisms, such as the QAA Institutional Audit, the external examining system, the control of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies over some teaching programmes and the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS), had on the work of academics?

***Research Question Two:*** What perceived impact have the internal quality assurance mechanisms within the institution, namely, peer observation, student course evaluation, annual programme review and the approval system for new and revised

programmes and units, had on the work of academics?

To address these two research questions, I conducted 64 interviews and a substantial document analysis. The first research question, for example, is concerned with the perceived impact of external quality assurance mechanisms on the work of respondents, so the respondents were asked what they thought of external mechanisms as a whole. The respondents held mixed views toward these mechanisms because each mechanism had pros and cons and each mechanism was perceived to have both a positive and a negative impact on their work. For example, the perceived positive impact of external mechanisms was seen to lie in the increased awareness of the importance of good teaching, an increased confidence in teaching, a different insight into teaching, and keeping respondents in touch with academics from different universities. By asking the respondents their general perception of the external mechanisms, I developed a more holistic picture of how external quality assurance mechanisms actually affected the work of respondents.

After exploring the respondents' general perception of the external quality assurance mechanisms, I examined the impact of individual external mechanism on the work of the respondents by asking them what effect they thought the individual mechanisms had on their work. This process gave the respondents a chance to discuss the individual mechanism in depth and further reflect on the process of quality audits. I generated large amounts of data on that question. One finding appeared was that the respondents' positive perception toward the individual mechanism depended on whether that mechanism was teaching related or not. If the mechanism was teaching related, respondents perceived it as important and useful.

Otherwise, the respondents perceived the mechanism as distant from their work and showed little interest in it. For example, the 2005 NSS was the least accepted external mechanism, while the role of professional bodies in relation to teaching programmes was the best accepted. One reason was the perceived flawed methods of

the NSS and the perceived use of the NSS in institutional system use instead of teaching. Another reason was that the professional body prescribed and controlled teaching and curricula, which made respondents feel it to be compulsory to observe its requirement. As for the other two external mechanisms, the majority of respondents preferred external examining to the QAA because they regarded external examining as a peer review and because external examining did not increase the workload of most of respondents as they were not external examiners.

The perceived general impact of external quality assurance mechanisms and the respondents' different attitudes toward the individual mechanisms helped to address the first research question on how the external mechanisms affected the work of the respondents. That process also allowed me to realize that the respondents' different perception of a quality audit was related to their different positions. One example was that an academic manager knew more of the QAA and the NSS than academics and managers were more likely to emphasize the potential effect of the QAA and the NSS on the work effort of academics than did their academic colleagues. One explanation for this different perception is that many of these manager academics had jobs related to a quality assurance mechanism, so they knew more about these mechanisms and tended to assure people, especially outsiders, that these mechanisms were both important and useful. The analysis of the relationship between the respondents' perceptions and the respondents' position let me understand why the respondents had mixed views about the external quality assurance mechanisms, as well as allowed me to understand the influence of the external mechanisms on the work of the respondents.

In answering the second research question on how the respondents perceived the impact of internal quality assurance mechanisms on their work, similar methods were used to those regarding the first research question, and the answers achieved for that question (See Chapter 9). After addressing Question Two, I compared the findings to Research Question One with that of Research Question Two and found that although

respondents held mixed views toward both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, in general they found that the internal mechanisms more useful to their work than were the external ones for four reasons. First, the respondents were more familiar with the internal mechanisms. Secondly, the external mechanisms were perceived as less relevant to their work than were the internal mechanisms. Third, respondents were more likely to be sceptical of external mechanisms than internal mechanisms because they had doubts on the methods of these mechanisms. Fourth, there was a blurred distinction between external and internal mechanisms. Some external mechanisms were internalized in the case study university, but there is little evidence that respondents treated the internalized mechanisms as important.

The analysis of respondents' perception of the quality assurance mechanism and the comparison of respondents' attitudes toward internal and external quality assurance mechanisms not only addressed the two research questions in Phase One but also enabled an understanding of the influence of the quality audit on the work of the respondents. In order to explore the impact of quality audit further, I conducted a Phase Two study by emailing all original 64 respondents. Thirty replied. There was one research question included in this Phase Two study:

***Research Question Three:*** Do academics perceive themselves as professionals? Is there a perceived tension between the quality audit process and culture and the perception that academic work as a profession?

This question explores whether there is a relationship between the quality audit and academics' notion of professionalism because the words "professional" and "professionalism" appeared frequently in the responses in the first phase interviews. All 30 respondents confirmed that they were professional. Half felt the tension between the quality audit and the notion of their professionalism, caused by the time cost of the audit, the bureaucracy of the audit, and a general distrust of audits in academics. The respondents also interpreted how they perceived bureaucracy and professionalism in their work (See Chapter 10). The findings for Research Question

Three explain why these respondents held mixed views toward quality audit and why there was vocal dissatisfaction about the quality audit among them. During the analysis of the data, I explored whether this data proved or disapproved my theoretical framework adopted from Power (1994 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000). The differences and similarities between my research and their two researches are analyzed below.

### **Section Two: Comparison to Research by Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000)**

My research findings differ from those of Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) to a certain degree. The most obvious difference is the time period and the teaching assessment/review methods. What Power and Shore & Wright mainly concentrated on was audit in the 1990s. The audit for the period 1993-2001 used Subject Review, a kind of assessment of all subjects taught in higher education institutions for a cycle that lasted from 1993 to 2001 (QAA, 2008a). Subject Review was perceived as a tight control over the work of academics (Morley, 2003). In contrast, my project studies the quality audit that occurred shortly after Subject Review. This quality audit process not only involved an Institutional Audit of the QAA, but also a variety of quality assurance mechanisms within and upon the institution. According to Harvey (2005), Institutional Audit is a light touch review method because it focuses less on direct assessment of academic teaching at the subject level and more on ensuring that the quality assurance systems of the institutions are working effectively to maintain academic standards and quality. These different teaching assessment/review methods can greatly influence the impact of quality audit on the work of academics. Moreover, my case study university had just experienced an Institutional Audit when I started my research in 2005. The time span of my research and that of Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) was then different.

In addition to the different time period and different methods of quality audit, my research findings differ further from those of Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000). It is good first to compare those findings with Power (1994, 1997) and then with Shore & Wright (2000).

### **2.1 Comparison to Power (1994, 1997)**

One difference between my research finding and Power's (1994, 1997) is the impact of quality audit on the work of academics. Power argued that the audit had little impact because it focused on paperwork instead of the real teaching of academics. Yet one third of the respondents in my case study were supportive of quality audit and argued for its importance in improving their work and increasing awareness of the importance of good teaching and improved teaching practices.

Another difference between my research finding and Power's (1994, 1997) is that Power (1994, 1997) perceived auditing as power over the institution, but this research indicates that it is not the audit processed per se, but rather the QAA that creates power hierarchies and places them on the institution. The QAA has the power to influence the reputation of the university because the publication of Institutional Audit results on a website can influence potential students in their choices of universities, especially when students have to pay top up fees. The case study university complied with the requirement of the Institutional Audit and had to use large amounts of paperwork to demonstrate to the QAA that its internal quality assurance mechanisms worked properly and maintained the quality of teaching and learning. The majority of respondents had little interest in this paperwork and perceived it as a waste of time, so they regarded this compliance process as a sign that the QAA just wished to create a power hierarchy that would control their university.



Except for the differences indicated between my research and Power's, there are many similarities. Both Power (1994, 1997) and my research confirm that audit works as control over the higher education institutions because the quality assurance mechanisms imposed upon the university will check the performance of the quality assurance mechanisms within the university. To be specific, my case study university complied with the requirements of the quality audit and established its own internal quality assurance mechanisms, such as peer observation and student course evaluation, to ensure the quality of teaching. The external quality assurance mechanisms, for example the QAA, checks whether these internal mechanisms are in place. These two levels of checking suggest that quality audit works as a control of the university's control.

## **2.2 This Research Compared to the Research of Shore & Wright (2000)**

After comparing my findings with that of Power, it is important to compare this research with that of Shore & Wright (2000) because their work was one of my theoretical frameworks. According to Shore & Wright, audit shapes a new organizational culture and is used as an instrument for new forms of governance and power, thus embodying a new rationality and morality and engendering among academic staff new norms of conduct and professional behaviour. What they implied is that the audit is closely related to the work of individual academics and is designed to reduce academic freedom and to change their professional behaviour.

There was little indication in my respondents of the perceived quality audit as having tight control over their work. Instead, the respondents regarded the audit as a symbolic regulation. Although most respondents were aware of the existence of the quality audit, they felt that the impact of the Institutional Audit and quality assurance mechanisms on their work was decreasing when compared with the audit during

the period of Subject Review. Moreover, some quality assurance mechanisms worked as optional practices and were not visible in the case study university. These included peer observation and annual programme review. Such optional and invisible practices made respondents feel that it was not compulsory for them to take part in the audit, so some chose to ignore it or even show resistance. Secondly, there was an inconsistent implementation of quality assurance mechanisms within the department/school. For example, the majority of academic respondents knew little about the NSS. This ignorance of and resistance to the quality audit, together with the inconsistent implementation of quality assurance mechanisms, suggest that the quality audit worked more as a symbolic regulation over the work of respondents than as a tight control over their work.

Under this symbolic regulation, about one-third of my respondents found that the quality audit was useful for increasing academics' awareness of the importance of good teaching, suggesting that the quality audit produced a cultural change of teaching among the respondents. This finding confirms the view of Shore & Wright that the quality audit produced some new norms of academic conduct. However, the culture change revealed by my case study appeared slighter when compared with the change found by Shore & Wright (2000). The current culture change is a lasting change from the Subject Review, because Subject Review had such a tremendous effect on the work of respondents that its influence still existed during the period of Institutional Audit. Also, the changed review methods of quality audit affected the degree of this change. This audit was perceived as being less related to teaching than the Subject Review, so respondents felt relaxed during the process of quality audit and found its influence decreased when compared with the influence during the Subject Review period.

The differences between my research findings and that of Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) suggest that the quality audit using different review methods achieved a different effect on the work of academics in different time periods. Thus,

it is important to analyze a quality audit according to its precise time period. Another implication of these differences is that there is a danger in the quality audit's adopting light touch review methods because that policy made individual academics perceive the quality audit as less relevant for their academic work. It is becoming easier for UK academics to ignore the quality audit.

### **2.3 The Contributions of the Study**

My research aims for an in-depth study of how academics perceived the impact of quality audit on their work, analyzing how academics in one research intensive university perceive current quality assurance mechanisms and also through questioning and addressing the quality audit theories developed by Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000). The study also reveals and analyses the value tensions between academics and quality audit, as well as demonstrating some of the differences and similarities between academic work as a profession and the traditional concept of a profession.

My study is important first in that it is much more comprehensive in its coverage of internal and external quality mechanisms than any previous UK study. These mechanisms studied include those established both before and after the setting up of the QAA. This kind of specifically focused research has not been carried out before now. Moreover, my research not only focuses on the specific quality audit methods, but also on the audit culture and the whole process of the quality audit, including its perceived purpose and its effect, so my research provide an in-depth and a more comprehensive picture of how academics perceive the impact of the quality audit on their work.

The importance of my research also relates to its timing. There is little research on the period between when Subject Review disappeared and the revised 'light touch'

Institutional Audit was set up. My research focuses on this interim period and especially on that time when the QAA carried out its first round of 'new' Institutional Audit after the Subject Review ended. The timing of this study will help the reader understand the quality audit as an ongoing process that continues from the Subject Review to the Institutional Audit.

The third important contribution of my research lies in its questioning of and addressing the theories of quality audit developed by Power (1994, 1997) and Shore & Wright (2000) in the following three ways:

- My research focused on the actual quality audit process and culture shift in the higher education sector, unlike Power who applied the audit mainly to the public service sector in general. My study reveals that quality audit was not perceived by my respondents as impression management in the way that Power argued, but rather was perceived as being of positive importance, although with limitations, for one-third of the respondents in my case study whilst two thirds saw quality audit as being negative or neutral in its effects. This finding suggests that quality audit was actually perceived as have both positive and negative impacts on the work of academics, instead of being universally regarded as a useless process, as indicated by some other previous researchers, for example, Morley (2003) and Newton (2002).
- Although Power (1994, 1997) perceived the audit as having/creating administrative power over the institution, my research indicates that it is not the audit process *per se*, but instead the QAA that creates and places power hierarchies upon the institution because some quality assurance mechanisms, for example, peer observation, are peer processes and do not necessarily create a power relationship between the reviewer and the reviewee. These findings allow the reader to understand the quality audit in a more comprehensive way, instead of treating its various procedures as if they were all the same.

- My research considered the quality audit from the perspective of seven different academic subjects and disciplines, instead of focusing only on one discipline as Shore & Wright (2000) did. My argument about a culture shift of teaching produced by quality audit is developed from the findings of Shore & Wright (2000), but is different in revealing that not all academics responded to the audit passively or with resistance. Some respondents have begun to regard regular review and self-evaluation as part of their professional work, a change in attitude that demonstrates increased awareness of accountability in some academics. This finding can be perceived as evidence of a slight culture change among some (even if a minority) of academics. This change could (if found in other universities too) have the effect of making academics pay more attention to the needs of students and could also contribute to the development of academic work as a profession.

My research also studied and analysed the main sources of dissatisfaction among the academics interviewed about quality audit and noted that for my respondents this lies in the tension that exists between the process of the quality audit and academics' notion of professionalism. This is an aspect that has been seldom been discussed in the previous research. The importance of considering this tension is that this focus draws attention to both the pros and cons of audit cultures, processes, and its related mechanisms, such as: peer observation, student course evaluation, annual programme review, Institutional Audit of the QAA, the National Student Survey and external examining.

Addressing this tension could help academics to understand the quality audit as both symbolic regulation and something which has a positive impact on their work, even if it is somewhat limited. Such understanding could improve the future implementation of quality audit at both the national and institutional level. It could also help increase mutual understanding between academics and those responsible for the quality audit and its procedures. For example, that awareness could help

policy makers realize the pitfalls of the quality audit, and increase the chances of national policy makers and manager academics within institutions taking the needs of academics into account for the purposes of quality audit. My research findings could, moreover, result in an improvement of quality assurance mechanisms because manager academics could acquire a more precise and immediate understanding of the shortcomings of these mechanisms. That understanding gained from this case of one university could also help to implement positive and more effective quality assurance mechanisms within universities in the future.

The fifth and final important contribution of my research is that although respondents argued that academic work is a profession, academic work is actually different from the traditional profession to some degree. The lack of a concept of an expert service in teaching, as mentioned by quite a few of my respondents, distinguishes the academic profession from more traditional professions. These perceived differences could help people to understand not only academic work in the context of the quality audit, but also why academics responded differently to quality audit processes. The quality audit process was perceived by my respondents to be challenging some of the traditional academic values (give example). These values derive from subject fields where academic professional authority was so strong that they did not like being checked and assessed by people outside their subject areas. When academics were facing the external review of a quality audit, respondents constructed and utilized the discourse of academic professionalism to fight against the quality audit to maintain or regain control of their subject/discipline and their social status within their institution and their profession. The other implication of this finding is that it is time either to redefine the meaning of the profession to have it include the work of academics or to define academic work as a profession but with its own special features.

### **Section Three: Reflections on the Research Process**

Of course my research had not only merits, but also limitations. As indicated in the methodology chapter, the empirical data of my research was mainly based on interviews and public official documents. There are limitations to depending heavily on interviews because of their obvious problematic nature. Interviews can only capture a snapshot of the overall viewpoints (Kvale, 1996) of the respondents. The respondents' perception of the audit might also be confined to only that specific period of time of my research. If some changed workload or positions now, they might view the audit differently. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that my research took place shortly after the first round of Institutional Audit, to reduce any potential superficiality of this specific interview data.

The other problem with interviewing as a method of research is that the responses may be based on emotional impact or the perceived purpose of the interviewer (Keats, 2000). Although this study was careful not to present emotion when asking for the respondents' perception of the quality audit and a lot of open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews gave all respondents more space to elaborate their views, some might have concealed their views in the interviews because of their positions or a sensitive relationship between teacher and students.

In addition to the potentially problematic nature of the interviews, I was also aware of the influence of my international student status on the interviews. As a student, I have no working experience in the higher education sector in England, so technically speaking I am not an insider in terms of the work of the UK audit. This background affected my data collection in both positive and negative ways. The disadvantage is that I had little knowledge of higher education in UK and my knowledge of academics and their work in UK was also limited. I did spend a large amount of time studying the context of the quality audit during the first two years of my Ph.D. study. Another disadvantage I discerned was that some academics imposed their academic

power upon me during the interviews. For example, a couple of respondents put off or cancelled scheduled interviews for no reason.

However, being an international student also had some advantages. One was that I was detached from the quality audit process, so did not have strong personal feelings, either negative or positive, toward the quality audit unlike the academics who experienced the audit. Thus, my interpretation of academic views towards the quality audit was little influenced by personal experience. Another advantage was that my international student status made most of the respondents feel comfortable about talking about the nature of the quality audit, allowing me to collect ample data quite easily.

Another limitation of the interview research method was that my sample in one department conceivably was slanted because the academics I interviewed were designated by the head of school. This process might have influenced the final data. Considering that there is that limitation, I was careful with all data collection and tried not to place any personal bias onto either quality audit or the work of the academics. I adopted an interpretive research paradigm to try and capture my interviewees' perceptions through their descriptions and interpretations of their experiences with the audit. I then compared those perceptions with official document records and afterward provided a set of experiential accounts of the quality audit to the respondents for readers to reflect on here.

#### **Section Four: Further Research**

Although my research interpreted how academics perceive the impact of a quality audit and their reasons for dissatisfaction with the audit, these are additional areas for further research. It has not been possible within the scope of my research to cover the views of the QAA and the HEFCE for how the quality audit affects the work of



academics. There was a limited time for my Ph.D. study, so my research only presents the perception of academics at one university in England without making any comparisons with other universities or with the QAA and the HEFCE. However, it is worth examining the latter aspect in the future to explore the impact of the quality audit from the official point of view. An additional comparison of the official views on the quality audit with those of academics will determine further similarities and differences. This comparison will help those involved in the quality audit to understand it from different perspectives and different sources and provide a holistic picture of the quality audit in a complete British context.

Another possible research study for the future is to compare my findings with research into a post-1992 university in England to explore whether academics from research – intensive and teaching – intensive universities have different perceptions of the quality audit. However, it is important at that time to state the different time spans of the two researches since the quality audit uses different review/assessment methods during different time period and some review methods are changing in the first and second round of the Institutional Audit. For example, the Discipline Audit Trails (DATs) is no longer used in the second round of the Institutional Audit. Such changed review methods will definitely affect the impact of the quality audit on the work of academics. New respondents can easily have a different perception of the quality audit. Moreover, in any data analysis, the contexts of two different institution types should be taken into account, because their individual quality assurance mechanisms may not be the same. If there are differences, it will be important to analyze the causes and what possible effects they will have on the current and future work of academics.

A third possible research is to carry out a third round of interviews on the sixty-four respondents in this case study to learn their perceptions of the feasibility of establishing an academic leaning quality assurance system. It is important to explore their perception of academic leaning quality assurance systems to learn what kind of

academic leaning systems will both maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning, and how such a system can work to its best advantage for the most students.

## **Appendices List**

Appendix 1: Project introduction

Appendix 2: Academic consent form

Appendix 3: Interview questions for academics (Phase one interview)

Appendix 4: Interview questions for head of Department/school (Phase one interview)

Appendix 5: Interview questions for staff responsible for QA matters (Phase one interview)

Appendix 6: Interview questions for people responsible for faculty quality assurance and undergraduate studies (Phase one interview)

Appendix 7: Interview questions via emails (Phase two interviews)

Appendix 8: Chronological history of higher education funding bodies

Appendix 9: Document sheet on information about the interview and the interviewee by Flick (1998, p.174)

Appendix 10: Respondent 5's Attributes, Knowledge of and Attitudes towards Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Appendix 11: Examples of coding and categories

Appendix 12: Summary of coding ( Respondent 5' s comments on peer observation)

## **Appendix 1: Project Introduction**

My name is Ming Cheng. I am a PhD student in Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. My project is about the Perceived Impact of Quality Audit on the Work of the Academics. I am interested in exploring how the internal quality assurance mechanism at the department level has affected the academic work from the perception of the academics. I am also interested in the perceived impact of the external quality assurance mechanism on the work of the academic.

The internal quality assurance mechanism of the department will cover peer observation, student evaluation, annual programme review and approval of new and revised programme and unit. The External quality assurance mechanism will include QAA, External Examining, National Student Survey and Professional and statutory body. As to the work of academics, I am going to focus on the undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum, workload and academic relationship to students.

**Appendix 2: Academic Consent Form for participating in Research by Ming Cheng towards a PhD at the University of Bristol**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research. I am Ming Cheng, a PhD student in Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, England. My supervisor is Professor Rosemary Deem.

The purpose of my research is to explore the Perceived Impact of Quality Assurance on the Work of Academics. The research is open-ended in nature and it is intended to have the potential to benefit any participant. The research procedure involves interviewing the academics and some document analysis. I would also like to have access to some of your departmental documents, as appropriate.

It is fully intended that your participation will be treated in confidence, that you are completely comfortable with the process and that you are free to withdraw at any stage. All data will be kept confidential and any publication of data – for this dissertation and subsequent research – will be anonymised. I have informed your head of department/school about my research. Beyond this, any further participation by you would require your additional consent.

I do require a written record of your consent, so if you agree to take part in an interview in the research as set out above, please sign for it.

Thank you again

Interviewee signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix 3: Interview Questions for Academics (Phase One Interview)**

#### **Personal profile**

Gender; position- years of working at Bristol; type of contract

#### **Internal quality assurance mechanism of the department**

1. Are you mostly teaching-focused or mostly research focused or a mixture of both? How much time do you spent on teaching each week? Do you have administrative work for your department? If, yes. What is it? Why did you come to do this work? Are you happy with your current workload? If, no. How did you balance your work last year?
2. Do you know how the internal quality assurance mechanism of your department works? Are there any recent changes of it? If, yes. What are the changes? What has caused the changes?
3. Does your department have a system of peer observation? If yes. Is it working voluntary or compulsory? How has it affected your classroom teaching practice?
4. Do you think the undergraduate should pay their fees? Have the existing fees made any difference to how the academics teach? Will variable fees affect this more or will it be the same?
5. What effects does student course evaluation have on the work of the academics in your department? How seriously is it taken? Has the student fees made any difference to the importance of student evaluation in the department?
6. Has Programme Specifications made any difference to your teaching practice? How if at all has it affected curriculum?
7. Has the Annual Programme Review (APR) had any impact on your teaching? How about its impact on curriculum?
8. Does the approval system at department and faculty level for new and revised programme and unit have any impact on curriculum in your department? Does it have some impact on your teaching?
9. Are there any other issues about internal quality assurance of teaching that you

would like to say?

### **External quality assurance mechanism**

1. Do you think QAA is a good idea or not? Why?
2. Do you know the Subject Benchmarking Statement of your discipline? If, yes. Has it had any impact on your work? If, no. (let him read one) Do you think it will have some impact on your work?
3. Is there any joint undergraduate programme in your department? If, yes. How is the Subject Benchmarking Statement applied to it? (some department)
4. Your department had DATs last year. How has it affected the work of the academics? (some department)
5. What is your view of the pros and cons of the external examiner system? How if at all does it affect the work of the academics in your department? Have you ever been an external examiner? If, yes. What did you make of the experience? Has it been useful to you here?
6. Has your department discussed your results in the 2005 National Student Survey for your department? What was the outcome of this? Do you think the Survey is going to affect how academics teach? Will it make academics pay more attention to teaching and students? Will the Survey make any difference to the curriculum?
7. Is there any relevant professional or statutory body involved in undergraduate programme approval in your department? If, yes. Which one(s)? How has it affected the curriculum in your department? (some department)
8. Are there any other issues about external quality assurance of teaching that you'd like to say?

## **Appendix 4: Interview Questions for Head of Department/School (Phase One Interview)**

**Information to be sought:** career as academic etc Annual Programme Review Report; who is on the Faculty Quality Assurance Team; self –evaluation document for departmental review

### **Personal profile**

Gender; years of working at university and elsewhere; ever been QAA assessor

### **Internal quality assurance mechanism of the department**

Change as appropriate from QA interviews

What are your main responsibilities vis a vis teaching in this department?

1. Would you please let me about your departmental quality assurance mechanism and how they work? (Who involved; how organized; what strategies) Are there any recent changes in this mechanism? If, yes. What are the changes? What has caused the changes?

What impact has QA had on the teaching in your department?

2. Does your department have a system of peer observation? If yes, is it voluntary or compulsory? What is its impact on the classroom teaching practice in your department?
3. Do you think undergraduate should pay fees? Have existing fees made any difference to how you and your colleagues teach? Do you think variable fees will affect this more or will it be the same?
4. What effects does student course evaluation have on the work of the academics in your department? How seriously is it taken?
5. Has having to write Programme Specifications made any difference to the teaching practice of the academics in your department? How if at all has it affected curriculum?
6. Has the Annual Programme Review (APR) had any impact on teaching in your department? How about its impact on curriculum?
7. Does the approval system at department and faculty level for new and revised programme and units have any impact on curriculum in your department?



8. What do you think of the new system for new programme approval (ie going first via FPARC and UPARC not the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees)? Is it an improvement on the old system?
9. If a staff of your department is not happy with his or her overall workload, is there anything you can do to help?
10. Is there any other issues about internal quality assurance of teaching that you would like to raise?

#### **External quality assurance mechanism**

1. Do you think QAA is a good idea or not? Why?
2. What changes if any has the 2004 Institutional Audit report and visit had on your department? Have you read the report?
3. Your department just experienced the DATs in 2004. Does it have some impact on the work of academics in your department? (some department)
4. 4. Has your subject Benchmarking Statement had any impact on the work of the academics here?
5. How is the Subject Benchmarking Statement applied to any joint undergraduate programmes?
6. 6. What is your view of the pros and cons of the external examiner system? How if at all does it affect the work of the academics in your department? Have you ever been an external examiner and if yes, what did you make of the experience? Has it been useful to you here?
7. Has your department discussed your results in the 2005 National Student Survey for your department? What was the outcome of this? Do you think the Survey is going to affect how academics teach? Will the NSS make any difference to the curriculum? Will it make academics pay more attention to teaching and students?
8. 8. Is there any relevant professional or statutory body involved in undergraduate programme approval in your department? If, yes. Which one(s)? How has it affected the curriculum in your department?
9. Are there any other issues about external quality assurance of teaching that you'd like to raise?

## **Appendix 5: Interview Questions for Staff Responsible for QA Matters (Phase One Interview)**

**Information sought:** member of the Faculty Quality Assurance Team; self-evaluation document for departmental review

### **Personal profile**

Gender; position-years of working at university and elsewhere in HE; type of contract; ever been a QAA assessor?

### **Internal quality assurance mechanism of the department**

1. I understand that you are responsible for the quality assurance matters in your department. Would you please tell me about your main responsibilities? How did you come to be doing this job?
2. What other administration, teaching and research are you involved in? Are you happy with your current workload? If, no. What are the problems with it?
3. Do the Faculty's quality assurance mechanisms have much impact on quality assurance of teaching in your department?
4. Are you a member of the Faculty Quality Assurance Team? If so how long have you been a member? If no, have you met all the members of the Faculty Quality Assurance Team?
5. Does your department have a system of peer observation? If, yes. Is it working voluntarily? How has it affected the classroom teaching practice in your department?
7. Do you think the undergraduate should pay their fees? Have existing fees made any difference to how the academics teach? Will variable fees affect this more or will it be the same?
8. How does student course evaluation work in your department? How has it affected the work of the academics? How seriously is it taken?
9. Has Programme Specifications made any difference to the teaching practice of the academics in your department? How if at all has it affected curriculum?
10. Has the Annual Programme Review (APR) had any impact on teaching in your

department? How about its impact on curriculum?

11. Does the approval system at department and faculty level for new and revised programme and units have any impact on curriculum in your department?

12. What do you think of the new system for new programme approval (ie going first via Faculty Planning and Resources Committee (FPARC) and University Planning and Resources Committee (UPARC) not the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees)? Is it an improvement on the old system?

13. Are there any other issues about internal quality assurance of teaching that you would like to say?

### **External quality assurance mechanism**

10. Do you think QAA a good idea or not? Why?

11. Has subject Benchmarking Statement of your discipline had any impact on the work of the academics here?

12. Is there joint undergraduate programme in your department? How is the Subject Benchmarking Statement applied to it? (some department)

13. What is your view of the pros and cons of the external examiner system? How if at all does it affect the work of the academics in your department? Have you ever been an external examiner and if yes, what did you make of the experience? Has it been useful to you here?

14. Has your department discussed your results in the 2005 National Student Survey for your department? What was the outcome of this? Do you think the Survey is going to affect how academics teach? Will the NSS make any difference to the curriculum? Will it make academics pay more attention to teaching and students?

15. Is there any relevant professional or statutory body involved in undergraduate programme approval in your department? If, yes. Which one(s)? How has it affected the curriculum in your department? (some department)

16. Are there any other issues about external quality assurance of teaching that I did not mention?

## **Appendix 6: Interview Questions for People Responsible for Faculty Quality Assurance and Undergraduate Studies (Phase One Interview)**

### **Personal profile**

Gender; years of working at university and elsewhere; ever been QAA assessor

### **Internal quality assurance mechanism of the department**

1. **(A)** What are your main responsibilities as ××? Are you also an education director? If, yes. What are your main responsibilities?
2. **(B)** What responsibilities do you have for QA of teaching in your faculty?
3. How do you guarantee academic standards of undergraduate degrees in your faculty?
4. What impacts has the internal QA had on teaching in your faculty?
5. Is there peer observation of teaching in your faculty? What impact has it had on teaching?
6. How seriously is the student course evaluation taken in your faculty? How has it affected the work of the academics? (teaching; academic relationship to students)
7. Has having to write Programme Specifications made any difference to the teaching practice of the academics in your faculty? How if at all has it affected curriculum?
8. Has the Annual Programme Review (APR) had any impact on teaching in your faculty? How about its impact on curriculum?
9. Does the approval system at department and faculty level for new and revised programme and units have any impact on curriculum in your faculty?
10. What do you think of the new system for new programme approval (ie going first via FPARC and UPARC not the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees)? Is it an improvement on the old system?
11. Are there any other issues about internal quality assurance of teaching that you would like to raise?

### **External quality assurance mechanism**

17. What impacts has the external QA had on the teaching in your faculty?
18. Do you think QAA is a good idea or not? Why?
19. Has the 2004 Institutional Audit visit had some impacts on your faculty?
20. Has the subject Benchmarking Statement had any impact on the work of the academics in your faculty?
21. Is the Subject Benchmarking Statement applied to any joint undergraduate programmes in your faculty?
22. What is your view of the pros and cons of the external examiner system? How if at all does it affect the work of the academics in your faculty? Have you ever been an external examiner and if yes, what did you make of the experience? Has it been useful to you here?
23. Do you know the outcomes of the 2005 National Student Survey for your faculty? Do you think the Survey is going to affect how academics teach? Will the NSS make any difference to the curriculum? Will it make academics pay more attention to teaching and students?
24. Is there any relevant professional or statutory body involved in undergraduate programme approval in your faculty? If, yes. Which one(s)? How has it affected the curriculum in your faculty?
25. Are there any other issues about external quality assurance of teaching that you'd like to say?

## **Appendix 7: Interview Questions via Emails (Phase Two Interviews)**

- Do you think you are a professional? If, yes, why? If, no, why? May I know how you define professionalism?
- Is there some conflict between the requirement/procedure of quality audit and your perception that you are a professional? If yes, would you please give me some examples?
- Bureaucracy/bureaucratic is a word that appeared frequently in my interview data. Would you please let me know how you define bureaucracy? Would you please give me some examples?

## **Appendix 8: Chronological History of Higher Education Funding Bodies in UK**

1. The University Grant Committee (UGC) was established on 14 July 1919 and dissolved on 21 June 1989.
2. The Universities Funding Council (UFC) was established on 1 November 1988 under section 131 of the Education Reform Act 1988.
3. The Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Councils (PCFC) was established on 1 November 1988 under section 132 of the Education Reform Act 1988.
4. Both the UFC and the PCFC were dissolved on 31 March 1992 under the provision of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.
5. The Higher Education Funding Council for Education (HEFCE) was established on 6 May 1992 under the section 62 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. The HEFCE assumed its full responsibilities for distributing grants to HEIs on 1 April 1993.

**Appendix 9: Document Sheet on Information about the Interview and the Interviewee by Flick (1998, p.174)**

Date of the interview:
Place of the interview:
Duration of the interview:
Interviewer:
Identifier for the interviewee:
Gender of the interviewee:
Age of the interviewee:
Profession of the interviewee:
Working in this profession since:
Professional field:
Raised (countryside/ city)
Number of children:
Age of the children:
Gender of the children:
Peculiarities of the interview:



**Appendix 10: Example of data analysis coding**

**Respondent 5's Attributes, Knowledge of and Attitudes towards Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

**1). Respondent 5's attributes of interviewee (Descriptive coding)**

Identifier for the interviewee	5
Date of the interview	09/03/06
Place of the interview	office
Duration of the interview	1 hour 28 minutes
Gender of the interviewee	male
Years being an academic	11 years in case university and 1 year in another university
Position of the interviewee	people in charge of faculty undergraduate studies
Rank	Reader
Professional field	***
Experience of being a QAA assessor	No

**2). Respondent's knowledge of quality assurance mechanism**

2.1). Individual interviewee's knowledge of internal quality assurance mechanisms of the university

A. Nothing; B. A little bit; C. Some; D. A lot; E. Very well

	Annual Programme Review	Student Course Evaluation	Peer Observation	Approval System for New Programmes and New Units
QAPC	D	E	E	E

2.2). Individual interviewee's knowledge about external quality assurance mechanisms

A. Nothing; B. A little bit; C. Some; D. A lot; E. Very well

	QAA	External Examining	Professional and Statutory Bodies	2005 National Student Survey
QAPC	E	E	A	D

**3). Respondent's attitude towards quality assurance mechanism**

3.1). Academic attitude towards internal quality assurance mechanisms

A. Very dislike; B. Dislike; C. Neutral; D. Like; E. Like very much

	Annual Programme Review	Student Course Evaluation	Peer Observation	Approval System for New Programmes and New Units
QAPC	D	B	B	B

3.2). Respondent's response to external quality assurance mechanisms

A. Very dislike; B. Dislike; C. Neutral; D. Like; E. Like very much

	QAA	External Examining	Professional and Statutory Bodies	2005 National Student Survey
QAPC	C	E		B

## Appendix 11: Examples of coding and categories

Interviewer: It is interesting. I hear that the poor observation of teaching may be the

**Respondent 5:** It is a difficult question. ... I (Pause), I am not sure whether it (the internal quality assurance mechanism) has a very big impact, ... because I am pretty sure we have been teaching very well, and students were very happy, ... before the mechanism was introduced, so I think, the mechanism has ... reassured us that the basic things are ok. Obviously, they can always be better sometimes, identify ways that things are better, but ... in my experience, there haven't been any sort of really big issue that come up and everything has to be changed. There are some smaller issues ... where there are some changes, for example, ... where there is a department where ... the students were concerned,... but it took them a long time to get their work back. I think ... they have raised it with the department, but the FQAT focused on this. I think, the department has been thinking of ways ... of responding to the problems any way, but one of the things the FQAT can do ... is to actually give suggestions and advice. And the result of the process of the discussion was that... changes were made and students are getting happier. They get their feedback earlier ... and they feel that ... they get the feedback on time for it to be useful. It did not involve a major change for everything the department did, but it did involve the change, and it was involved ... at least in part because the problem was highlighted through the quality assurance procedure.

**Comment [I1]:** Subsubcode: usage of IQA reassuring basic things ok

**Comment [I2]:** Subsubcode: personal experience of IQA: no big issues raised

**Comment [I3]:** Subcode: Internal quality assurance no major impact on UG teaching

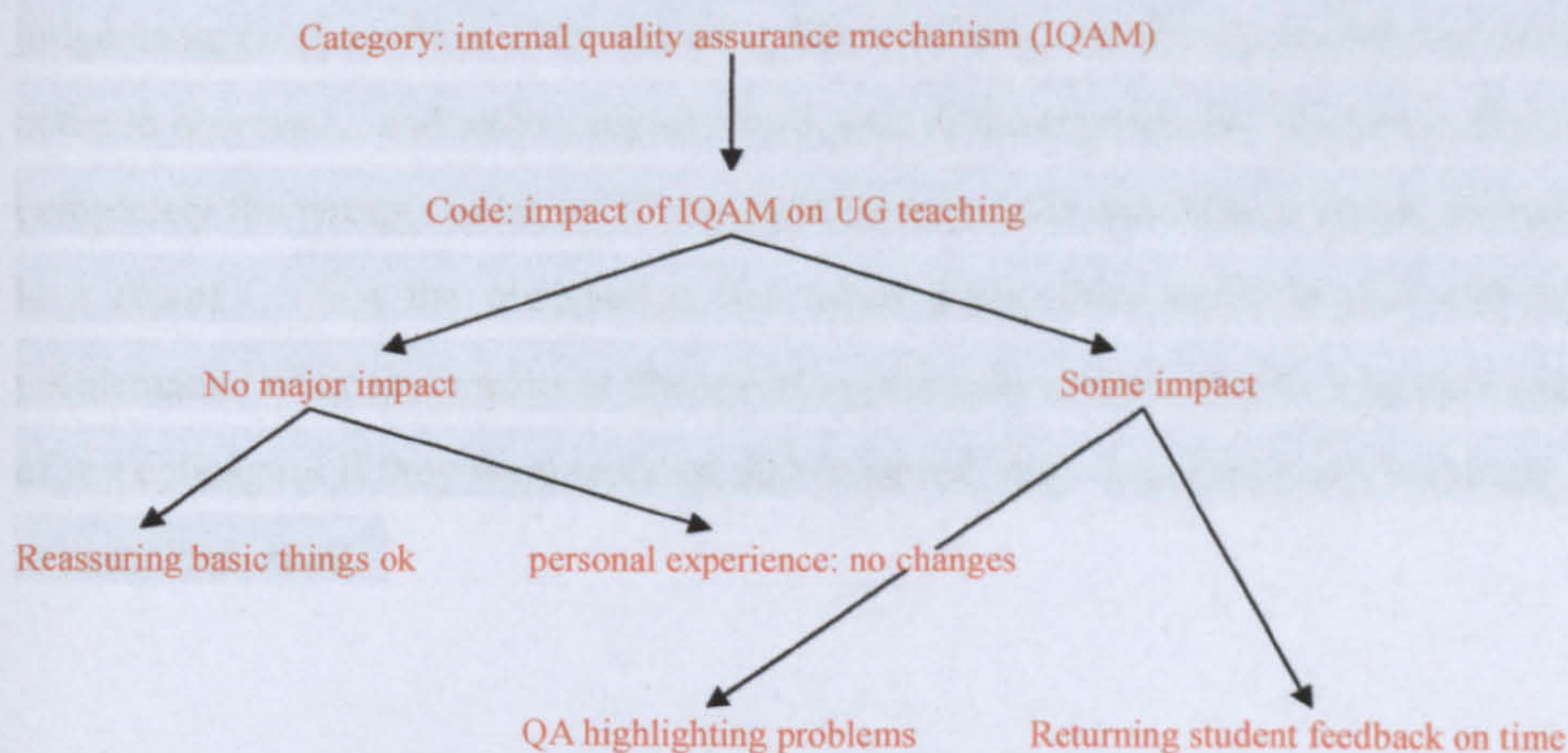
**Comment [I4]:** Code: impact of internal quality assurance mechanism on UG teaching

**Comment [I5]:** Subsubsubcode: QA highlighting problems

**Comment [I6]:** Subsubcode: academics returning student feedback on time

**Comment [I7]:** Subcode: some impact of internal quality assurance mechanism on UG teaching

**Comment [I8]:** Category: internal quality assurance mechanism (IQAM)



**Interviewer:** It is interesting. I hear that the peer observation of teaching vary in the departments of your faculty.

**Respondent 5:** Certainly, in almost every department. ... I think there is one department ... which hasn't organized this quite perfectly, but generally speaking, yes. This is a well established practice. ... The way in which it is organized differ slightly from department to department. Some guidelines give scope for doing things differently ... according to the particular wishes of the members of staff. It is not ... an identical procedure in every department, ... but in almost every department, it is being done regularly.

**Interviewer:** So how has the procedure benefited your faculty?

**Respondent 5:** The simple answer is I do not know, because I think the benefit is at the individual level, so...I can say for myself, I am benefited both from being observed and observing. And I know that various of my colleagues have done, ... but it is something which happens between two people, there isn't a sort of system ... where any sort of practice get more widely spread around. (pause) I think, in some way, it is a shame, because it means that it might be a really, really good thing going on, ... but it takes a really long time before everyone knows about it. On the other hand, one of the things many of my colleagues... have always been very concerned about with peer observation, is that it is a sort of separate performance evaluation or judgements on promotion ... or anything like that. It is not about a member of staff come to observe ... and write a report which goes to the department. You know, that is completely the wrong model, so if you decided there isn't should be a report, if there is a report ... that the observation has taken place, then anything else will be problematic. What that means is that people participate in the process. I know many of my colleagues if they were reported and observed, they would be much less happy to participate at all.

**Comment [I9]:** Subcode: peer observation a well established practice

**Comment [I10]:** Subcode: peer observation practice varies from departments

**Comment [I11]:** Category: Internal quality assurance mechanism

**Comment [I12]:** Subsubcode: peer observation a regular practice

**Comment [I13]:** Code: peer observation

**Comment [I14]:** Subsubcode: peer observation benefits individuals

**Comment [I15]:** Subcode: peer observation a good practice

**Comment [I16]:** Subcode: peer observation is a good practice

**Comment [I17]:** Subcode: peer observation a good practice

**Comment [I18]:** Subsubcode: peer observation takes time to be accepted

**Comment [I19]:** Subcode: peer observation unpopular among academics

**Comment [I20]:** Subsubsubsubcode: peer review is performance evaluation ... [1]

**Comment [I21]:** Subsubsubsubcode: peer observation doesn't need report

**Comment [I22]:** Subsubsubsubcode: writing report is problematic

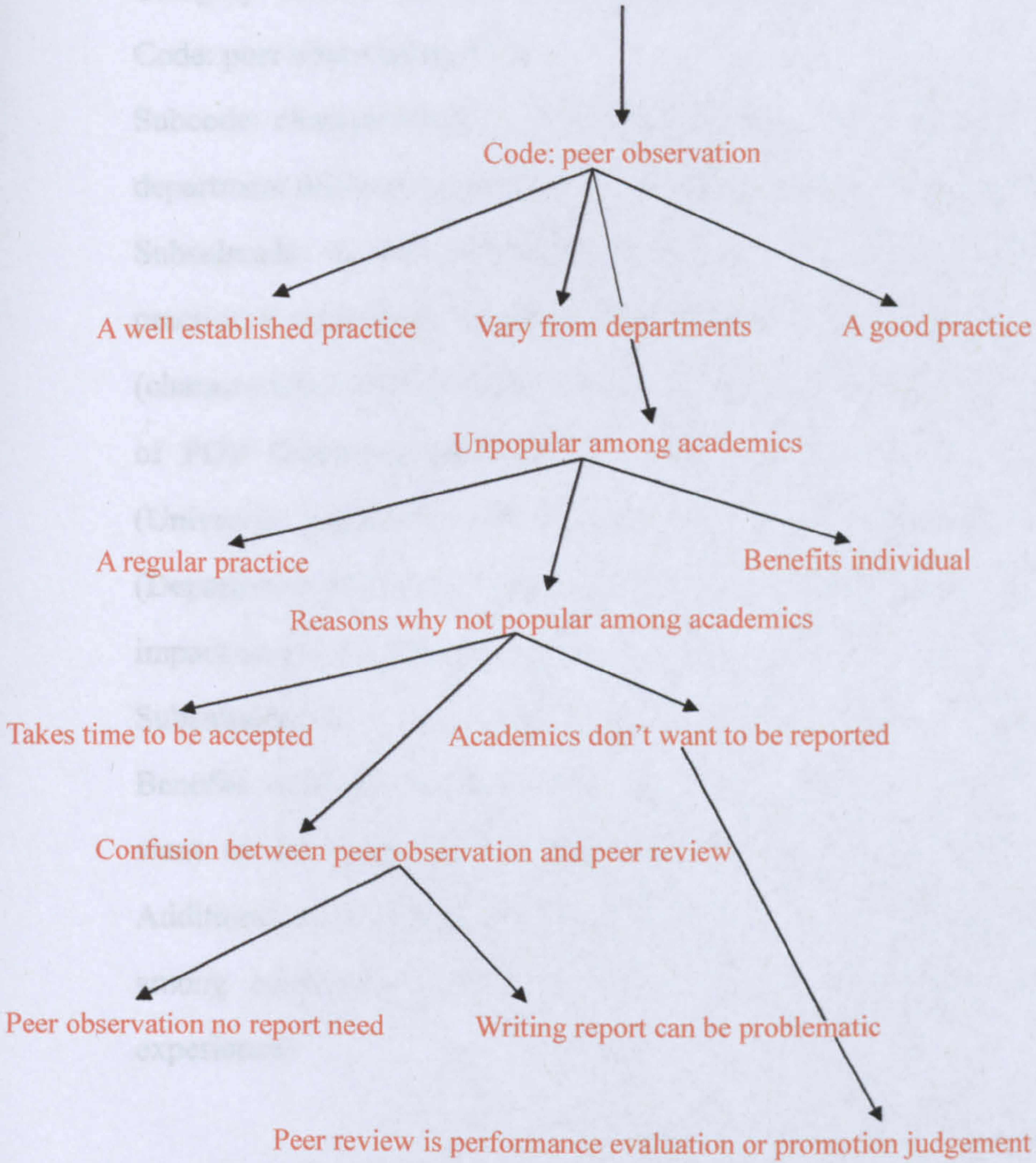
**Comment [I23]:** Subsubsubsubcode: academic confuse peer observation ... [2]

**Comment [I24]:** Code: peer observation

**Comment [I25]:** Subsubsubsubcode: academics don't want to be reported

**Comment [I26]:** Subsubcode: reasons why peer observation not popular

Category: internal quality assurance mechanism



**Appendix 12: Summary of coding ( Respondent 5' s comments on peer observation)**

Category: Internal quality assurance mechanism (IQAM)

Code: peer observation (PO)

Subcode: characteristics of PO; Development of PO; University guideline of PO; department different attitudes to PO; Impact of PO on UG teaching;

Subsubcode: A well established practice; Vary from departments; A good practice; a compulsory practice; Need of improvement; Unpopular among academics; (characteristics of PO) / QAA driven; Years of adopting PO in faculty; (development of PO)/ Guideline unhelpful; Guideline bureaucratic; Guideline ineffective (University guideline of PO)/ Resistance to QAA; Welcome PO; Doubts on PO; (Department different attitudes to PO)/Impact depends on individual involved; Little impact on good teacher; Personal experience; (Impact of PO on UG teaching)

Subsubsubcode: A regular practice(a well established practice)/ Benefits individual (a good practice); Takes time to be accepted; Academics don't want to be reported; Confusion between peer observation and peer review; Additional work; Additional bureaucracy; No improvement on teaching (unpopular among academics)/ Not much observer can say; Teaching is good (personal experience)

**Data analysis:** This coding suggests that in this instance peer observation is believed to have had little impact on undergraduate teaching, although this interviewee feels that peer observation is good practice and that it takes time for peer observation to be accepted by the academics; this interviewee feels that the practice of peer observation needs improvement. This interviewee points out that peer observation is driven by QAA, which is unpopular among academics. It is no wonder that in the academics' eyes, peer observation is bureaucratic and meanwhile, it has caused them additional work, so there is resistance to peer observation among the academics. This interviewee suggests that some academics confuse peer observation with peer review by saying that it is a wrong model of peer observation to make academics observed

and reported. According to the university guideline, it is only peer review that is performance evaluation and promotion related, so it needs not only observation but also report. There is a fear among academics that report will cause them problems, so some academics are not willing to take part in peer observation.

Another reason for peer observation having had little impact on undergraduate teaching is because it is quite hard for colleagues to criticize each other during the observation. One reason is because their teaching is good and the observer doesn't have much to say. The other could be that they are colleagues, it could be easier and more friendly to say: 'it is jolly good' to the observee than telling the observee that his/her teaching needs to be improved.

**Memo:**

This suggests that the implementation of peer observation in the department needs improvement, because some academics haven't got a clear idea of what peer observation is. It might be that academics haven't got time to read the guidelines of PO provided by the university or maybe they don't want to be bothered with reading the guidelines. It is tentative to say that the neglecting of regulations could contradict academics' claim that they are professionals, because it is professional' responsibility to understand certain regulations concerning their work.

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