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Theme – *Regulating Higher Education: quality assurance and neo-liberal managerialism in higher education: a global perspective*

## **Academic Resistance to Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education in the UK**

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this article is on academic resistance to quality assurance processes that have developed within UK higher education in relation to both research and teaching. These quality processes are often seen as forms of disciplining technologies (Blackmore, 2009) and are arguably an important part of the means by which new public management has been introduced to the sector. They have been perceived to monitor and control academic work in relation to teaching and research within UK universities over the last 20 years or so. However, following the work of Thomas & Davies (2005), this article attempts to look at the complexity of academic reactions to these processes and the ways in which academics situated within particular contexts might challenge and resist the discourses and subject positions that are being offered to them. Following the work of Graham (2011) and Hyatt (2013) a Foucauldian informed critical discourse analysis is used to examine two critical case studies of resistance to both the quality assurance processes for teaching and the assessment and evaluation of university research work.

### **Introduction**

There has been much written on the neo-liberalisation of higher education and the pernicious role of new public management processes in disciplining and subjugating the academic workforce. The austerity cutbacks to higher education and the shift towards increased privatization of the sector, more acutely in England than elsewhere in the UK, has arguably intensified these processes. As Shahjahan (2014) argues, the reforms have been widespread;

More specifically, neoliberal reforms included drastic funding cutbacks to public HE which led to increases in private revenue generation (e.g., increases in Business HE partnerships and rising tuition fees), proliferating accountability measures of HE outcomes, the restructuring of shared governance towards corporate models, and the resurgence of part-time academic labour (p.221).

There is no denying the veracity of the pace and scale of change and the significant influence of 'neo-liberal logics' (Shahjahan, 2014) that permeate UK higher education such that the overriding economic imperative and logic of self-enterprising individuals and economic rationality becomes the means by which the existence of higher education is routinely justified. This is merged with processes of new public management as part of the modes of "technology of governance that makes

certain material practices and policies intelligible, practicable and governable” (Shahjahan, 2014: 221). The effects of these technologies as has been perceived almost universally to have played a destructive force in the lifeworld of academics and indeed those working across all sectors of public education, is captured well by Ball (2003) in his evocation of the ‘terrors of performativity’ heaped on educationalists through the impetus of these technologies of control. This impetus to performativity “requires individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations” and “live an existence of calculation” (p.215).

This sense of the all-encompassing power of neo-liberal logics and new public management processes extends throughout much of the literature on higher education and is seen to be detrimental to academic autonomy, creativity and authenticity. However, the potential of academic resistance to such demands for performativity is something that is interesting to contemplate and is what has motivated the writing of this article. In terms of theorising processes of new public management, there has been a tendency according to Thomas & Davies (2005) “to portray NPM as a ‘blanket discourse’, colonising the public services” (p.689). It should be understood that “the strength, cohesion and normalizing effects of NPM are highly context dependent” making it necessary to move away from images of NPM as a ‘given’, stamping its authority on the hapless professional in a highly deterministic and unidirectional way (p.689). There is a call to theorise these processes in a more nuanced way and to understand the myriad of ways in which individuals respond to, incorporate and resist these processes and the meanings and modes of being that are being promoted.

While acknowledging the strength of new disciplinary technologies ... and the crusade throughout the 1990s to inculcate in public sector professionals new attitudes, values and identities, the paper illustrates how individuals are not passive recipients of discourses. Rather, NPM is highly dynamic, with individuals appropriating different meanings in reflections on self in conjunction with NPM. This throws into question the portrayal of NPM as a hegemonic discourse, sweeping across the public services, deprofessionalizing all in its wake. (Thomas & Davies, 2005: 700)

The focus of this article, therefore is on the quality assurance processes that have developed within UK higher education and raise the question of academic resistance to these processes. Given that these quality processes are often seen as forms of disciplining technologies (Blackmore, 2009), I want to look also at the complexity of these processes and the ways in which individuals situated within particular contexts might challenge and resist the discourses and subject positions that are being offered to them as well as the different meanings that may be given to particular situations.

I will begin by giving an outline of the development of quality assurance processes in the UK in relation to both research and teaching, including a discussion of the research literature that has investigated academic responses to these processes. I will then consider the challenges of theorising ideas of resistance that allows for a more nuanced stance on organisational process and individual subject positionings. I will then go on to discuss the work of Graham (2011) and Hyatt (2013) in order to set out the critical discourse analysis framework that will be utilised to explore the two “critical case” examples of academics resistance to these quality assurance processes of teaching and research. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn on the implications of this for challenging these

quality assurance processes and the neo-liberal and new public management agendas that are perceived by many to have engulfed higher education.

***From where to here? – the evolution of quality assurance of research and teaching in UK universities***

The extent of the quality assurance and/or monitoring procedures in the UK has gained worldwide renown. It has been praised but also much maligned as academics in other countries fear the extent of quality audit processes utilised in the UK context. However, although the UK was certainly an early adopter of such national audit systems, many other countries across Europe and Australasia in particular increasingly utilised such monitoring tools, albeit perhaps in different forms and in different ways as demonstrated in this special issue (Jarvis, 2014). I am focusing here though on the UK context and the development of quality assurance processes and so will provide some very brief historical context to this as well as a discussion of the research literature and commentary, which looks at perceptions of the impacts on institutions and academic work. I will address teaching and research processes in turn.

*Quality Assurance of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in the UK: the HEQC/QAA*

In the early 1990s the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established to extend the processes of quality audit in UK universities. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established in 1997 and it was jointly funded by institutions through annual subscriptions and by funding councils. It was the job of the QAA to continue the process of 'subject review' that has been established under the HEQC. 'Subject Review' involved the evaluation of teaching and learning processes within universities whereby a numerical scoring of 1-4 was awarded in 6 key areas, including curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, student support and guidance; learning resources and quality management and enhancement. This resulted in an overall score out of 24 points to be awarded. This process of 'subject review' was ended in 2001 and was replaced by a 'lighter touch' Institutional Audit process. The resistance of academics to 'subject review' explored in this paper was significant this policy change (Laughton, 2003). Institutional audit was replaced by Institutional Review between 2011 and 2013 and a new process of Higher Education Review was introduced in England and Northern Ireland from 2013/14.

One of the main critiques throughout much of the literature on quality assurance is the superficiality of the systems and the lack of connection to the meanings and 'life worlds' of individual academics – in a way that does nothing to change or improve teaching and learning within universities. Instead, it might be seen to 'colonise the lifeworld' of academics in a detrimental way where processes of management and control drive out more authentic forms of change and development (Morley, 2003; Luckett, 2007, Blackmore, 2009, Jackson & Bohrer, 2010). Many of these claims are supported in large scale studies researching the academic profession across different countries, though the picture is a complex one (Locke & Bennion, 2011).

### *Quality Monitoring of Research in Higher Education in the UK: The UK RAE/REF*

The UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) now Research Excellence Framework (REF) was established in 1986 and has gone through much development and change since that time with RAE exercises conducted in 1992, 1996, 2001, 2008 and most recently a REF exercise in 2014. This national system of research evaluation is often cited and discussed in the literature on performance based research evaluation systems. It is a national systems of evaluation of university research which is conducted through a process of peer review with specialist panels evaluating the research work of all universities in the UK. In the REF2014 grading are awarded from the lowest ranking of 1\* through to 2\*, 3\* and the highest ranking of 4\*. A 4\* grading corresponds to research work which is seen as world leading. The UK was an early adopter of this type of national system, though a number of countries with historical ties to the UK have also introduced such exercises though with some significant differences in terms of content, process and outcome, including Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia (Lucas, 2006; Lucas, forthcoming). It is important to mention that the result of each successive RAE/REF determines the amount of research funding that is distributed to UK universities via the Higher Education Funding Councils (for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It has been argued that there has been a successive concentration of funds to the elite universities in the UK.

Much of the research evidence produced has been rather scathing of the impact on academic work and sense of identity in the new managerialist and audit cultures engendered by the RAE and REF2014 (Harley 2002; Loftus 2006; Sparkes, 2007). Loftus (2006) has argued that there has been a process of 'RAE-ification' and that the consciousness of the academic has been changed such that 'we have built ourselves into the body-walls of the system that now encloses us' (Loftus, 2006: 111). What this means is that academic researchers and the production of research knowledge has been moulded in order to fit the demands of audit regimes such as the RAE/REF. The intensification of academic working environments has also been emphasised and the possibility of research activities being valued over all other forms of academic work (Sikes, 2006). However, more recent literature has also raised the question of the potential positive influence as individual academic re-appropriate these processes as a way of re-invigorating academic subjectivities (Cupples & Pawson, 2012).

A recent study by Leathwood and Read (2013) found that gender differences of workload pressures and time constraints were still evident, with women participants in their study reporting less time for research due to increased workloads in relation to teaching and administration. Some respondents were considering leaving academia or considering volunteering to move to teaching only contracts. However, not all women or men saw the RAE/REF as wholly negative and some reported that they could now have their research efforts taken seriously and valued within their departments and that the RAE/REF allowed them to have a more successful research career (Lucas 2006; 2009; Leathwood and Read 2013). This could perhaps reflect the different experiences of those who are considered 'research active' and whose research is valued and those who are not. The overwhelming argument from Leathwood and Read's (2013) study is that despite gains for some, there remains substantial inequity in the system.

The capacity, therefore, of academics to be able to resist these perceived forms of control as well as feel constrained by them is what will be explored in this paper. The next section will attempt to

consider how we might begin to theorise around the notion of resistance before attempting to consider how that can be explored through the analysis of the 'critical case' incidents.

### ***Theorising the Practice of Resistance***

Shahjahan (2014) argues that even though there is much talk of resistance in discourse within education, there is still a need for greater theorization of this concept and this is particularly so in higher education where to date very little work has been done.

According to the subversive resistance frame, neoliberal logic and its associated institutional practices are neither complete nor absolute in HE. Faculty and administrative staff do not fit neatly into the neoliberal model of performance-based selves, self-serving individuals and/or service providers. In interpreting, renegotiating and instrumentalizing neoliberal categories and policies, individuals with multiple and intersecting identities ensure that their autonomy is not completely colonized and disrupt the repetition of neoliberal norms in the academy ... This resistance paradigm highlights the always incomplete nature of hegemonic neoliberal logic and foregrounds the fluidity of subject positions in the academic hierarchy. (Shahjahan, 2014: 225)

Neo-liberal logic is not totalising and the quote above helps to illustrate how resistance works to destabilise and confuse and potentially subvert the norms of this logic by drawing on the conflicting discourses, meanings and practices that exist in social organisations. There is a need, however, to depart from romantic emancipatory notions of resistance to see it more as a disruptive force for change which to some extent is always caught within the logic of that which is being resisted and the power of this positioning is acknowledged.

Resistance is understood as a constant process of adaptation, subversion and re-inscription of dominant discourses. This takes place as individuals confront, and reflect on, their own identity performance, recognizing contradictions and tensions and, in so doing, pervert and subtly shift meanings and understandings. This is an ongoing process arising from the desire to gain the security and comfort that reside in knowing ourselves, and dealing with the tensions and discord that arise from these contradictions. Resistance is, therefore, stimulated by the contradictions, weaknesses and gaps between alternative subject positions... Our conceptualization of resistance also involves recognizing its ambiguity and contradictions. To resist something also means to reify it, by privileging it as a meaningful area for political contest. (Thomas & Davies, 2005: 687)

Thomas and Davies (2005) also argue for the need to move away from seeing resistance only as "a reaction to repressive power" and instead recognise it as "a multidimensional, fluid and generative understanding of power and agency (p.700). They talk further about the "valuing of small pockets of resistance" that are "chipping away at the micro-politics of power" (p.701).

The effects of such resistance are low levels of disturbance, leading to the destabilizing, weakening and greater incoherence of dominant discourses, such as NPM, and in turn creating greater looseness and opportunity to exploit spaces. It is these spaces that enable the

construction of alternative identities and meanings within forms of domination (Thomas & Davies: 701).

It is within this kind of theoretical framing that I want to address the 'critical case' incidents of resistance to the quality assurance processes relating to research and teaching in higher education in the UK. There has been a tendency in much research in this area, including my own work (Lucas, 2006) to emphasise the ways that these mechanisms have served to regulate and discipline academics. There is also a need, however, to look at ways that resistance at all levels serves to challenge and shift discourses and practices within UK higher education. As discussed above, there is evidence with the research literature that not all academic experience these mechanisms as totalising and that forms of resistance are evidence (Cupples & Pawson, 2012) in relation to how individuals operate within particular institutional contexts. This evidence has primarily been given by conducting qualitative research with academics, predominantly through in-depth interviews. However, this article focuses on the site of negotiation of meaning produced within the public domain by academics through different medium though predominantly letters to newspapers and periodicals and personal blogs. In these text can be viewed the recognition of "ambiguities and tensions" that are utilised by the academic authors to present a case to challenge and subtly shift the meanings and to create a challenge to the policy direction of quality assurance of research and teaching and ensure political contestation of the terms of debate. The methodological approach undertaken through a form of critical discourse analysis will now be discussed.

### ***Understanding Academic Resistance to Quality Assurance Mechanisms***

In attempting to explore some examples of academic resistance to audit technologies and quality assurance processes in relation to teaching and research in higher education, I am drawing on the work of Hyatt (2013) who has produced a model to enable a form of critical discourse analysis broadly conceived within a Foucauldian perspective. It is argued that, "many scholars using discourse analysis within a Foucauldian framework have adopted a 'Foucauldianistic' reticence to declare method, fearful perhaps of the charge of being prescriptive" (Graham, 2011: 663). Despite this claim, attempts are made at least to characterise the conceptual framing for conducting a form of discourse analysis from within a Foucauldian perspective. Graham (2011) talks of 'doing poststructuralist discourse analysis' as uncovering the generative power of statements and the work that they do to construct particular perspectives on reality.

Instead, when 'doing' discourse analysis within a Foucauldian framework, one looks to statements not so much for what they say but what they do; that is, one question's what the constitutive or political effects of saying this instead of that might be? (Graham, 2011: 667)

Graham (2011), therefore outlines three important ideas that can be utilised from the work of Foucault in order to engage in a rigorous form of discourse analysis, namely; description, recognition and classification, which are potentially helpful. However, the critical discourse analysis framework devised by Hyatt (2013) will be primarily adopted in order to aid the illumination of the documentary data under discussion. It is argued that a Foucauldian informed discourse analysis is different from the proponents of critical discourse analysis predominantly in terms of the lack of methodological prescription in the former but also its more poststructuralist notion of the contingency of truth.

However, whilst there may be a difference in emphasis, I don't see these approaches as being mutually exclusive. The framework devised by Hyatt (2013) consists of an approach, which analyses the contextualising and deconstructing of policy texts. However, within this are potentially illuminating ideas such as 'modes of legitimation', which includes authorisation, rationalisation and moral evaluation as three important concepts by which to investigate texts. They are explained as follows;

1. Authorisation – reference to tradition, authority, custom, law, institutional authority or individuals as justification, with authority here seen as being unchallengeable.
2. Rationalisation - reference is made to the value and usefulness of a social action and cognitive and face-validity of a particular action, which may or may not represent a 'naturalised' ideological position.
3. Moral Evaluation – an appeal to a value system around what is good or desirable – ideological and linked to discourses e.g. a neoliberal discourse that asserts the desirability of educational measurement, comparison and the surveillance of teachers. (Hyatt, 2013; 840)

This form of analysis will be employed to look at two 'critical cases' of academic resistance in relation to the QAA and quality monitoring of teaching and learning processes and one in relation to the REF2014 and attempts to assure quality in relation to research in UK universities. There are few such instances of public statements of resistance and critique and so it was decided to look only at these two particular cases in order to illustrate the varied forms of resistance from academics in relation to quality assurance processes. The first 'critical case' incident is represented by a number of documents. Firstly, a letter sent by a group of Economics Professors from the University of Warwick to a periodical (THES, 2001) and then a statement also produced by the same individuals (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001) documenting the negative experiences of the QAA process undertaken at the university. The second 'critical case' incident relates to a number of personal blogs by Professor Sayer (Sayer, 2013) as well as letters to a periodical (THES, 2013) detailing his outrage at the treatment of academic staff during the process of preparing for REF2014. In each case, these documents were analysed using Hyatt's (2013) framework in order to explore the meanings being presented and subject positions taken up by the academics.

***"We have to stop the QAA Monster or it will eat us alive": academic resistance to teaching quality assurance process***

Increasingly, we are forced to do things because the QAA says so and threatens us if we don't, not because true teaching quality demands it. Enthusiasm and scholarship are being strangled by bureaucratic monitoring and demands for paper trails (Harrison et al, 2001, The Guardian Online).

The letter sent by a group of Economics Professors from the University of Warwick detailed their experiences of having undergone the QAA process of review and to express their negative viewpoints on the conduct of the audit and the basic premises underlying it. This letter was published on 30<sup>th</sup> January (THES, 2001). A follow up statement piece was also written on 23<sup>rd</sup> March giving further details and analysis of the experiences and viewpoints that had been expressed (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001). Harrison and colleagues detail that they received a "flood of letters



and emails from colleagues in universities across the country who supported their concerns and the negative views expressed on the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) process. This is further supported by the wide range of empirical research literature, which documents the negative perceptions of academics to these audit processes. However, what is significant about these events and the circumstances, which followed is that the Chief Executive of the QAA at that time, John Randall resigned and the TQA systems was completed revised. The revolt, therefore, was not a cry in the dark whilst enduring the perceived onslaught of quality assurance procedures but had a significant impact on changing the policy of how quality assurance was to be conducted in UK universities in the future. In looking at the documents; namely the letter to the Guardian newspaper from the group of Warwick Professors and the extended statement piece written by Harrison & Lockwood (2001), it is possible to delineate the ways in which they have sought to re-define the meanings and critically undermine the espoused meanings and principles given by the QAA and their justifications for the TQA process.

Much of the discourse and the statements presented in these documents challenging the TQA process can be understood utilising the concepts identified in the work of Hyatt (2013) and in particular his concept of different *modes of legitimation*. The concepts of *authorisation*, *rationalisation* and *moral evaluation* are particularly important in understanding the case made by the Warwick Professors. Each of these aspects will be addressed in turn throughout this analysis. In terms of *authorisation* there are a number of authorial positions used to support the case for re-visioning the meanings of the TQA process. The first is that of the authority of science, which the Warwick Professors position themselves within and question whether this can be attributed to the individuals involved in the TQA process;

We learnt that the QAA's methodology is not scientific. It is based on courtroom drama, not science. Of course in a courtroom it helps if your case is solid and the exhibits on your side dominate in quantity and quality. But that is only half the story. The other half is theatre: stage management and rhetoric. We supplied the hypotheses, the evidence, and the witnesses. We chose the students, the graduates and employers, the samples of work, and the internal documentation to be seen by the panel (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001).

These statements draw on the authority of science something, which is a taken for granted tradition within the discipline of Economics and contrasts this with the literary construction of evidence that they perceive as being the reality of what is produced within the TQA process. They argue, therefore, that not only is the process not scientific and objective but that it fails to deliver on its avowed aim of assuring the quality of teaching and learning within universities because it can only claim to "measure the degree of honesty of institutions' claims to quality" and not the actual quality itself (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001). The statements in the written documents also work to challenge the *rationalisation* of the TQA process and to question this. There is the claim that the TQA process is not able to measure change and therefore any improvement or otherwise in relation to teaching quality as the criteria changes across years and the methodology utilised making any comparisons across years impossible. The questioning of the *rationalisation* is done also with reference to the costs of the process and also to the institution both in terms of financial cost and that of academic labour and the risks of harming the spirit and intrinsic motivation of academic staff. The whole rationale for the mode of operation and justification of the process of quality assurance, therefore, is brought into question through the process. Furthermore, the *moral evaluation* is particularly

forceful in the undermining of the TQA processes. The human cost to individuals is emphasised in the “unpaid overtime, sleepless nights and disrupted career development” as well as importantly the “intrinsic motivation” of staff, which has been “devalued and increasingly replaced by responses to monitoring and external incentives (Harrison & Lockwood, 2001). They emphasise the distinction between the QAA seeking only to “assure” key stakeholders about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education as opposed to being able to “ensure” this (Harrison et al, 2001). The overall *moral evaluation*, therefore, rests on the inability of the TQA process to authentically engage with the process of ensuring the provision of high quality teaching and learning and instead in this process as actively disrupting the perceived natural order of the intrinsic motivation and authority of academics to provide this without recourse to regulation and monitoring. It becomes clear, therefore, how the TQA process and its avowed intentions and meanings are undermined and re-visioned by the process of questioning its *authority, rationale and moral purpose*.

As argued by Thomas and Davis (2005), however, in the act of resistance one also reifies and gives legitimacy at least in part to that which is being resisted and indeed, the Warwick professors state this quite explicitly as showing their support for the principle of audit and forms of regulation.

We are not going to return to a world without regulation, and that is probably a good thing. The reason is that in the market for higher education services there is a fundamental information asymmetry: we know best. Neither students nor most employers know as much as us academics about what we really do when we teach our own subject. For this reason demands for quality regulation are inevitable and we should acknowledge them as legitimate.

What is also interesting, however, is that they utilise the theories and discourse of neo-liberal economics to propose ways forward for the processes of auditing of teaching and learning in the future. In this way those who are in revolt against the QAA process are using the language of the market and the possible increased liberalisation of this further to provide alternatives to the current system. This demonstrates the ways in which forms of resistance are more nuanced and complex (Thomas & Davies, 2005) since those at least in part responsible for overturning are resisting the imposition of forms of new public management and the perceived regulation of academic work but not the potential over-arching discourse of neo-liberalism, which these academics at least would endorse. Resistance, therefore, comes in all forms. The Warwick professors use the investment of their own authority and dominance to challenge the mis-guided authority perceived to be imposed on them and the attempts to define the meaning of academic endeavour that surrounds this.

***“Whatever this charade is, it is not a framework for research excellence”: academic resistance to the quality monitoring of research***

There has been significant challenge and complaint about the RAE/REF since its early inception in 1986 and a chorus of concerned and sometimes outraged voices increased with each successive exercise. There have been numerous consultations on the development of the RAE/REF and objections from academics and learned societies has led to some changes to the system from the inclusion of pedagogic research, the evaluation of inter-disciplinary work and inclusion of part-time academics. There have also been instances where universities have taken a public declaration not to be included in the RAE exercise. There have been intentions to completely overhaul the RAE/REF

system making it a lighter touch possibly more quantitative based exercise, which was ultimately rejected. Despite the protests and the reporting of academic discontent in the research literature (Lucas, 2006)) there has been little public demonstrations of resistance to the RAE/REF by institutional leaders or individual academics. What I want to report on here, however, is a very recent public demonstration of resistance by one individual academic who was protesting against the process of decision-making around inclusion of academic staff at one institution within their REF submission. Professor Derek Sayer was reported in the Times Higher Education Supplement as launching “a surreal appeal against inclusion in his department’s research excellence framework submission” (THES, 2013). The reason that it is described as surreal is because he is a highly respected professor of history who is eminent in his field and would certainly want to be included by his university in their submission. Professor Sayer, however, is protesting the decision taken by his university not to include a reputedly high percentage of academic staff in their submission because they are (in most cases) deemed not to meet the high standard required to be awarded a 3\* or 4\* in REF2014. In solidarity with those excluded, therefore, he makes the case that he also wants not to be included in the submission. One particular member of staff was willing to publicise his non-inclusion in the REF2014 and to challenge the process.

Over the next few days, a number of colleagues across the university are to be informed that they will not be returned in REF. I am one of those colleagues and I wish to challenge the culture of secrecy around our situation, which blocks any form of engaged, collective response to the way in which REF, as it is being managed (here), impoverishes us all.

The public nature of these protests is mainly being carried out via social media and blogs – predominantly that of Professor Sayer, rather than the more traditional newspaper and other media, although letters to newspapers and periodicals were included. The explosion of twitter in particular as a means to access a wide public as a forum for discussion and debate is an interesting phenomenon. I want to explore the case, which Professor Sayer presents and the means by which his actions and words provide a form of resistance (Thomas & Davies, 2005) to the RAE/REF and through utilising the concepts provided by Hyatt (2013) as in the critical case study presented in the previous section. Professor Sayer’s case can also be explored through the concepts of *authority*, *rationalisation* and *moral evaluation*. One of the key concerns that he has is the change in rules governing RAE2014 whereby no funding is awarded to any grading less than 3\* and 4\* (classified as internationally excellent and world leading respectively), which means that institutions are more reluctant than before to enter staff who they think might achieve only a 2\* grading (classified as nationally excellent). His concern, therefore, is that fewer people will be chosen for submission. The process by which this is decided, he argues, has moved to an increased reliance on internal mock REF processes whereby the evaluation and award of mock grades was to be done in this instance within his own history department by “a *single* external reader, who was originally hired by the department in an advisory capacity as a ‘critical friend’. He raises questions, therefore about the expertise and therefore the *authority* of such individuals to be able to judge the quality of research outputs across an enormous range of specialist subject areas. The *authority* (of critical friends and internal assessors) to make such evaluations and the procedures within which these mock REF exercises take place, is being challenged by Professor Sayer. In challenging the *rationalisation* of the mock REF exercises, he makes the point that students being assessed are usually given more than one assessor within the process of such evaluations and yet “why are those whose livelihoods depends on their research – and its reputation for quality – not given at least equivalent

consideration as the student they teach?" (Sayer, 2013). This process of mock review undertaken within universities leads him to conclude;

The REF is no longer even any longer a research assessment exercise, in any meaningful definition of that term, because so much of the assessment is now done within individual universities, in anything but rigorous ways, before it enters the REF proper at all (Sayer, 2013).

This informal process carried out prior to the REF2014 within institutions is therefore, is shown to lack authority according to Professor Sayer because of the choice of one individual to conduct the evaluation. He attacks also the process and *rationalisation* of the conduct of the informal exercise predominantly because of the secret nature of how it is carried out and the lack of transparency in terms of how decisions are reached and evaluations made.

The key *moral evaluation* underlying the critiques levelled by Professor Sayer as hinted at above is in the human cost and the inequity of the system and the procedures by which judgements are being made that can potentially have devastating effects on an individual's career. Whilst he acknowledges that a university may claim that an individual not being submitted to REF2014 may not "in itself, mean that there will be negative career repercussions of that person", he accuses them of using 'weasel words' and concludes that;

If universities truly intend that non-submission in the 2014 REF should not in any way negatively affect individuals' career prospects then what is to stop them saying so categorically and unambiguously?" (Sayer, 2013).

Despite, the public nature of the protest and forms of resistance evident in this case, it is doubtful that it could have the same transformative impacts as the case detailed in the previous section. And despite the protest against his inclusion in REF2014, it is extremely likely that this was ultimately overruled by the university. Despite the fact, however, that this form of resistance may inevitably have led to little change in policy directly as in the previous case, what is powerful in the resistance and form of protest portrayed by Professor Sayer is the means by which he undermines the process and carefully constructs a means to chip away at the "micro-politics of power" by highlighting the "ambiguities and contradictions" (Thomas & James, 2005) within his institution by subverting the logic of and therefore the meanings associated with being submitted to the REF exercise.

### ***Understanding Forms of Resistance and Change in Response to auditing of Academic Work***

In undertaking the analyses above, there are perhaps three key areas to highlight. Firstly, that despite the ferocity of resistance in both cases to challenging the particular forms of quality auditing, there was very little evidence of any real challenge to the key principle of having these quality audits in the first place. Secondly, the three main areas of challenge related to a) the forms of authority being utilised in the process (authorisation), b) the process as it is exercised (rationalistic) and thirdly, c) the consequences (usually negative) for individuals (moral evaluation).

In England there was a significant challenge from Economics professors at the University of Warwick against the monitoring of the QAA procedures, which led ultimately to a radical overhaul of the agency and their quality assurance processes. This example, to some extent might help to challenge

the rather one-sided arguments of the passive role of institutions and academics within the managerialist onslaught of quality assurance mechanisms. This does not detract from the weight of evidence that details the way in which such mechanisms have radically changed academic work and roles in ways that can limit autonomy and challenge particular academic values. However, the more nuanced understanding of positionings and forms of resistance is important to explore and that is what I have attempted to do through this analysis. As highlighted, it is also perhaps significant to note that the sources of resistance in relation to the TQA came from academics at an elite research-intensive institution where forms of symbolic capital are high and also the positioning of these academics in the elite group of universities. This is also the case in relation to the status and credibility of Professor Sayer who describes himself as a senior Professor with over 30 years of research activity as a renowned scholar and someone who has held numerous important positions within his professional field. The success ultimately, therefore, of resistance, as least in these instances, is potentially reliant on the authorial positioning of the challengers. Furthermore, the success may only be at the level of challenging the discourse and the meanings of the quality assurance processes rather than being able to effect substantive policy change. Although in the case of the Warwick Professors this was shown to be possible as the TQA process was overturned. Lastly, in the examples discussed here, it is interesting to note the challenge was mainly to the particular quality assurance processes but not necessarily the neo-liberal and managerialist underpinnings. Perhaps, in the end this allowed the Warwick Professors the success achieved. Whatever the means of success however this might be evaluated the potential for transformation through resistance and revolt is an important one. As Shahjahan (2014) argues;

Amid neoliberalism's apparent encompassment of all subjectivities, ways of being, and life possibilities, some may deem resistance impossible. Yet this assumption is dangerous because it suggests that we have no agency and that neoliberalism is a permanent structure, rather than contingent on our daily assumptions, behaviours and actions. Furthermore, it ignores the myriad forms of resistance that are already taking place inside and outside the neoliberal academy. The 'impossibility of resistance' forecloses the possibility of alternatives and suggests the colonization of our imagination and ways of being. Shahjahan, 2014: 230)

The analysis of the 'critical case' incidents discussed here present a necessarily limited but perhaps significant examples of how such resistance is taking place within the academic arena in the UK and no doubt elsewhere both within institutions and also in the public sphere as the meanings and values of academic endeavours in relation to research and teaching and how these should be evaluated are contested.

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