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From quality to audit culture: Who dares to say NO?

Abstract

Quality has been one of the key words for and of any educational endeavour – either in the educational reform or the evaluation of institutions, programmes and processes. Together with the transparency and internationalisation of and in education, it has become a magical word for policy makers, directors, deans and students. Even more, it is the word that is taken for granted as a prerogative for success and as an aim in itself. Therefore, it is almost impossible to find a person who 'dares' to say *no* to the current 'quality trends'. There is, however, very little, if any, consideration for the concept from the point of view of the highly competitive, market-based and supply-demand based education, whether it is general education or specifically teacher education. Quality is everything; it is the aim of any process, work, institution, which is stated in any vision, mission and strategic aim of a country, institution or an individual.

The purpose of the paper is to deconstruct the 'holy trinity' – Quality, Transparency and Internationalisation, as well as to argue that quality, as it is implemented and in regard to the competitive, marketised national and international policy framework, leads to the audit culture in education.

1 Introduction

Quality has been one of the key words for and of any educational endeavour – either in the educational reform or the evaluation of institutions, programmes and processes. Together with the transparency and internationalisation of and in education, quality has become a magic word for policy makers, directors, deans and students. It has become an essential part of the vision and mission statements of educational institutions and almost a 'magical' word in the competitive environment of higher education in Europe and world-wide.

In Slovenia it is difficult to find a faculty that has no word 'quality' in its vision or mission statement or in an address of a dean (see Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, Faculty of Management Koper, Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana, etc.). Nytell (2007) also states that the use of the word 'quality' increased in the Swedish education policy documents from being mentioned 6 times in 1987 to the occurrence of 220 times in 2002. We can only speculate how many times the word is used today.

Quality is often associated with the quality process, or it is expressed as an aim of education. It is expected that Higher Education programmes provide quality education and connected to that also better employment opportunities and a better flexibility in the labour market and, therefore, they increasingly meet the needs of the contemporary market-pervaded societies. The 'old', traditional professional culture that encouraged the intellectual debate and enquiry, based on understanding education as a public good and a steering wheel for the societal progress has been replaced by commodified education (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Beckmann & Cooper, 2004; Roberts, 1998). Quality assurance, performativity and indicators, as well as the standards have been introduced to HE in order to serve the economic aims of countries. In Slovenia this 'economic' purpose of HE and commodified education is contained in the new development programme called Strategija razvoja Slovenije (Slovenia's Development Strategy; <http://www.slovenijajutri.gov.si/index.php?id=158>) and associated documents. In this document knowledge is used as a source and means for the competitive advantage in the global marketplace. It is supposed to increase the well-being of the country through economic measures. However, in order to use knowledge as a competitive advantage, it has to be measured according to the standards and performance measures. How do we know how 'good' education is and how well it serves and contributes to the national economic success? Quality assurance in different forms and ways seems to 'offer' a basis for the measurement and evaluation of the national 'educational success'. In search of the 'meaning' of education the emphasis is shifted from 'knowledge' to 'quality, thus the questions are raised of why, how and what determines the economic prosperity or the knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Our opinion is that the answers to these questions form the 'holy trinity' - Internationalisation, Transparency and Quality - which presents the basis for the knowledge economy.

The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct this 'holy trinity' – Quality, Transparency and Internationalisation – and to argue that quality, as it is implemented and in regard to the competitive, marketised national and international policy framework, leads to audit culture in education. In the following sections we are going to deconstruct each 'element' of the trinity and in the closing discussion we are going to argue that quality in itself leads to audit culture in HE. The conclusion of this paper indicates some implications for future developments.

2 Why?: Internationalisation and competitive advantage

Political rhetoric includes notions such as 'internationalisation', 'common European Research Area' and similar (see Delo, 2nd March 2007). Very little emphasis is laid on the historical and already existing internationalisation of HE and research. Teichler (2004, p. 6-8) raises these issues and argues that internationalisation, when understood and related to the mobility, open research 'space', academic knowledge transfer and the international education, has existed also in the past. Several pieces of evidence can support this argument – from international publications, joint publications, visiting professorship to visits and guest lecturers at and from foreign universities. There is, however, a major shift from these 'personal/individual relations and somewhat 'impersonal' communication through the publications to the institutional, organised and funded activities and processes.

During the current internationalisation of HE it is the institution and the individual who play an important role in the process of knowledge creation, storage and dissemination (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2007). The circle of shifting the focus from the institution to the individual and back to the institution indicates the new era of internationalisation, or better called re-internationalisation. 'Going international' was one of the major issues for the universities in the 1990's. However, this re-internationalisation brought about other changes and above all

required a different management and organisation of the universities. In order to support, enable and also control the international flows international offices emerged on the organisational charts, structural elements of programmes changed (e.g. the credit systems) and the standardisation, or differently said ‘the sameness’ was developed. In the framework of the knowledge economy, as well as the economic prosperity and competitiveness, these changes were based on the flow of students, teachers and funds, and required what Beckmann & Cooper (2004) label as the ‘new managerialism’. “This largely involved introduction of private –sector techniques to public sector management in the name of economy, efficiency and effectiveness” (ibid., p 4). One of the arguments for introducing the business-like approach in the management of universities and the public sector was also the increased need for responsiveness to the needs of the global flexible market.

2.1 The market

The concept of the ‘market’ can be discussed from different perspectives. We can understand it in economic terms as ‘a place of exchange’, either ‘real’ or virtual’, actual or symbolic – utopian-dystopian (Aldrige, 2005, p. 11) of value or material goods. Lubienski (2006, p. 4), for example, discusses the modern idea of ‘the market’ as a “/.../ metaphor, since oftentimes no actual marketplace exists, particularly in sectors such as education”. We can discuss market specifically in the context of marketisation of the public HE where the market is a ‘quasi-market’ (Trnavčević, 2007). Marketisation refers to a set of processes and activities based on the processes of decentralisation, deregulation, increased autonomy and devolution of power (Trnavčević & Logaj, 2007). These processes are ‘joined’ under the cover notion – a choice. Students are choosers, teachers are choosers and also institutions are choosers. Students can choose not only programmes but also locations, as within an open market they are no more bounded to one country or one university only. Teachers are choosers as they make networks and join researches with colleagues from the European and other universities. They do not need to change their jobs; they perform internationally by joining different networks and by establishing ‘alliances’. Finally, institutions choose – on the basis of the entry requirements and selection criteria they select between students and potential employees.

On the other hand, in order to generate the exchange, the other side needs to offer something in return – and they do: funds, reputation, family background, academic achievements, image etc. The exchange is generated only if there is ‘free’ space, open boundaries and seemingly limitless opportunities (Aldrige, 2005; Apple, 2004).

Lubienski (2006, p. 4) discusses ‘the market’ from a slightly different perspective. He defines the market as an institutionalised area of social interaction built on some suppositions - one of them being the desire of “individuals to exchange goods, services, and/or other manifestations of value in a manner that will maximize their own individual self-interest” (ibid.). He emphasises the ‘institutionalised area of social interactions’, which is seemingly opposed to the limitless, free market ideology. However, in education, and we would argue the same for other areas, the proclaimed ‘freedom’ is always limited. In public education, limits are even more explicit (for example the enrolment number of undergraduate full-time students per faculty is approved by the ‘government’).

The current internationalisation – mobility, exchange, joined projects, European funds - contains the features of the market and also generates the existence of the HE market. However, market “... acts as a metaphor rather than an explicit guide for action. It is not denotative, but connotative. Thus, it must itself be ‘marketed’ to those who will exist in it and live with its effects” (Apple, 2004, p. 18). In the context of marketised education the same can apply to internationalisation. It can be seen as a metaphor for exchange, mobility, joined

projects and has to be marketed in order to remain alive. It seems that in order to ‘justify’ internationalisation and, hence, to stimulate the exchange, internationalisation becomes one of the indicators of performativity, control and quality, in which commodified knowledge plays the role of a ‘product’ offered to be exchanged.

2.2 Commodified knowledge

Marketisation, understood as a set of policies that ‘push’ educational institutions towards the ‘market behaviour’, also changes the nature of the education, knowledge and management in HE institutions. Lyotard (1984, pp 4-5) argues that knowledge has become viewed as a commodity and claims that:

“Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its “use-value”.

In order to make the knowledge ‘sellable’ it has to be fragmented, split into pieces (programmes, modules, subjects and courses) and transferable/portable in terms of credits, which express its exchange value. Knowledge transformed into information becomes an object to valorisation in the new production. This kind of understanding also leads to a shift in organised learning. As Roberts (1998) states, Lyotard (1984) foresaw a shift in education, specifically in the whole system of organised learning.

“It is not hard to visualise learning circulating along the same lines as money, instead of for its “educational” value or political (administrative, diplomatic, military) importance; the pertinent distinction would no longer be between knowledge and ignorance, but rather, as is the case with money, between “payment knowledge” and “investment knowledge” – in other words, between units of knowledge exchanged in a daily maintenance framework (reconstitution of the work force, “survival”) versus funds of knowledge dedicated to optimizing the performance of a project” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 6).

If knowledge follows the same ‘rule’ as money flows then it has to be produced in ‘mega quantities’ in order to be exchanged in the marketplace. Thus we can notice an increase in study programmes, subjects, and modules that are offered in the marketplace. Sometimes not much more than titles are changed but the ‘quantity of offers’ implies a significant change. Knowledge, and we argue the same for education, becomes a commodity (see Ball, 2004; Kenway and Bullen, 2001) shaped and packed as different programmes, modes of dissemination and accessible to the choosers who are willing to invest in it. Knowledge and education become an individual’s investment into the future ‘happiness’, employment possibility and success (see Roberts, 1998). They are offered on the market – boundless international market of programmes, institutions and customers. Investments, however, have crossed the level of sufficiency for the ‘local’ producers and markets, therefore the profit maximising consumers, or as Baldwin & James (2000) call them ‘students as informed consumers’, are dragged from the international arena in order to make the market ‘alive’.

3 How? : Transparency

Strathern (2000) discusses the question of visibility in the social arena and argues that this is the place where visibility became an instrument of the explicit promotion. If we talk about transparency as visibility in the marketised policy environment of HE, then we need to discuss promotion. What is promotion in the context of the market, or specifically talking the marketing? Promotion, as Kotler & Armstrong (1991) argue, is a part of a marketing mix, a set of marketing tools that work together to affect the marketplace. In their opinion, promotion ‘consists’ of advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal sales. In order to communicate effectively with the current and the potential customers, a ‘promotion mix’ needs to be employed – it means using a combination of promotional tools in order to reach customers and stimulate them for the ‘purchase’. The aims of promotions, as Stefanou (1993) claims, are: to inform, to persuade, to remind, and to reinforce. These aims can be achieved if, among others, intangible features of a service (and education can be seen as a service in the marketing language) are made tangible. The more the ‘invisible’ becomes visible, or intangible becomes tangible, the more success in exchange can be expected. In this case, visibility/transparency is a source and a tool of promotion. Education becomes tangible and visible through programmes, courses, credits and different indicators of its effectiveness and efficiency.

At the same time, in order to make education attractive for customers, visibility/transparency of the processes inextricably built into the nature of education is promoted. Thus the story of visibility/transparency and promotion is limited within the market-promotion concept. Education has to be transparent in terms of processes, programmes, comparability, structural symmetry and achievements/competences acquired by the students. Quality, however, needs to be transparent as well, because quality of the institutions, programmes, teachers and outcomes are also promoted. The question how to make quality transparent so that it can best serve its purpose of gaining the competitive advantage in the international educational marketplace, is therefore related to and dependent on the ability to make quality visible. Some assumptions support the concept of transparency:

- a) There is always something that can still be made visible. If speaking in the language of the management there is always a challenge to discover or something new, better or improved to be made or revealed. Institutions can learn about themselves through different measures, models and approaches, and use the conclusions to promote themselves, to make themselves more transparent. Strathern (2000) discusses social structures, organisational values and other elements, which are particularly ‘desired’ to be made transparent.
- b) Being ‘invisible’ and non-transparent is basically unacceptable within the market metaphor, because markets are essentially linked to the control and surveillance (Aldrige, 2005; Lubienski, 2006; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Accountability includes control; the control of the visible – ‘the more it is visible the better it is controlled’ - and transparency is embedded in accountability, hence in control. Organisational and individual performances, achievements, procedures and methods are open to scrutiny and it is expected that this openness will lead to critiques and consequently to improvement.

“Transparency is in turn embedded in certain practices (artefacts, technologies) of accountability, epitomised by the notion of ‘audit’ in the devolved sense /.../. An organisation being audited is ipso facto being transparent about its dealings. We might, after Latour (1991, say that audit is transparency made durable; it is also transparency made visible” (Strathern, 2000, p. 313).

Accountability, therefore, also includes the ‘visible’ transparency. As such it is well marketable and a source and a ‘product’ for promotion.

4 What? : Quality

For commodified education the question of quality is central. Quality in and of education is a ‘magical’ word for policy makers, educators, deans and institutions. It seems we have come to the stage when even referring to quality already ‘helps’ to raise the public attention. From one point of view, quality is seen as an aim in itself, yet from different perspectives, especially those embedded in marketised education, quality is a means of gaining competitive advantage in the educational markets. If the quality is to serve this purpose then it has to be measured and promoted. In order to measure it and pack it into ‘boxes of quality’ it has to become ‘visible’. Performance indicators ‘promise’ to pull out the invisible and make it transparent through the measurement and outputs. “/.../ performance indicators are highly selective objectifications of performances”, argues Strathern (2000, p. 314). However, they are not only objectifications, they are also a ‘selection’ of the visible, and the possibly visible, and measurable elements. Tacit, silent elements of quality are, however, not tackled. In the ‘hunt’ for the silent elements, not only in order to identify them but also to measure them, different models and techniques are applied. We trust the technique and the ‘technical man’ who act as ‘translators’ of the invisible to the visible and who make this invisible visible, transparent to the public using effective promotional tools. Derrida (2001, p. 178) in his discussion on relevant translations questions the logic of translation - ‘nothing is translatable; nothing is untranslatable’. In his opinion, this axiom is not simply contradictory but it reflects the “condition of a certain economy that relates the translatable to the untranslatable, not as the same to the other, but as the same to the same or other to other. Here the economy signifies two things, property and quantity /.../” (Derrida, 2001, p. 178). If property is concerned with the ‘transportation’ into its language - the most suitable meaning in the most appropriate and relevant way - then the law of quantity is concerned with the calculable, measurable quantity. Quality, which we are concerned with can be understood and discussed through the ‘property’ and the ‘quantity’ of that quality. Performance indicators can be seen in the light of property, hence indicating the invisible elements brought out on the surface in the best possible, relevant and appropriate way, while the standards reflect the law of quantity – how ‘much’ of quality is translated into the ‘visible’ and how much transparency is consequently promoted. This kind of understanding can be applied to the current quality models, approaches and definitions of quality. In the management literature quality includes the measurement towards specified standards and therefore the customer satisfaction has to be measured as well (Sallis, 1993; Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1993). If the quality of education, an institution, a programme or a teacher can be assessed and measured according to the standards (e.g. credits, employment possibility, competences etc.) then the ‘invisible’ satisfaction of customers also needs to be measured in order to promote the quality from both sides – the visible and the invisible. For example, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (2008) have, among others, developed a model for measuring customers’ satisfaction which is based on identifying the gap between the expected and the perceived quality. By using two approaches (performance indicators and identified gaps), quality as a complex phenomenon is ‘translated’ into measurable items and is constantly audited. Audits are expected to draw public attention and critique, and therefore generate improvements (Strathern, 2000) or a ‘better quality’. In measurements we pass from quality to performance indicators and satisfaction – a passage that is, in Stronach’s terms (2007), no less than mystical. As such, it ‘promises’ an endless

improvement, even though we do not know an 'improvement of what'. TQM, ISO standards, 6 sigma and similar 'models' of quality are based on these 'endless' improvements. However, as Stronach (2000) argues, there is a specific threat when this kind of endeavour is undertaken. Namely, once performance indicators and standards are established we do not challenge them. It seems that the indicators 'lock' the improvement process into a cage of indicators, in which we try to make an improvement – the audit culture is established as constant monitoring of whether the standards have been met. The published league tables are then only a step further. In HE they have become well rooted in the practice of assessing the quality of HE institutions in spite of the 'limitations' and threats they impose upon the processes (Charle, 2007).

5 Who dares to say NO? : Concluding discussion

Political rhetoric about internationalisation, transparency and quality is well embedded in the ideology of the market. The 'holy trinity' can be seen as a signifier, a Master signifier (see Žižek, 2006) in the policy initiatives for increasing the power and control beyond the national boundaries. Educational institutions arrange their practices and work with the established indicators in order to meet the standards and to promote the achievements/quality, so as to gain the competitive advantage. Once 'the quality' is published in a form of league tables the struggle to move up on the ladder of quality, or keep a certain position, then starts.

Although we deconstructed the concepts of quality, internationalisation and transparency (what, why and how) in relation to the market-driven environment, and provided a critical perspective on these concepts we also have to indicate that these concepts are not new to education. As mentioned in the text, the concepts have existed also before the emergence of marketisation. However, in their present form their purpose, usage and related activities have changed. They serve the market and follow the logic and assumptions of the market.

Therefore, who dares to say No to quality? If somebody does, would the 'search' for the indicators become meaningless and would the whole endeavour of measurement and comparison in the international arena, the invisible that becomes visible, the myth of visibility, become deconstructed and 'emptied'? What would then happen to the market of higher education? There is no simple answer to these questions, if there is one at all. Even if there is an option to erase the contents (competition, league tables, comparisons etc.), there is no option at the time to erase the framework (marketised environment) of HE. Therefore, polarisation between the concept of quality NO – quality YES is futile.

As individuals we can take extreme positions in discussing the cons by simply saying NO – performance indicators and standards will not define an individual in any way. Education includes learning in all 'shapes', ways, modes and areas. If one emphasises the process and focuses on it then externally (institutionally or broadly) established indicators and standards are unimportant. It does not mean that I as an individual refuse international processes, collaboration and development in science, but only the measurement as the only way of determining quality.

However, even if NO is said at the individual level, the question about the refusal at the institutional and national (policy) level still remains open for two reasons. The environment in which HE institutions operate, for instance, is market-based and market-driven. The logic of the 'survival' is present (as foreseen by Lyotard, 1984) and the 'reality' of potential closure is a part of the market game. 'Survival' in the marketised environment is a source of power for a change but also a source of maintenance. 'Survival' also means contradiction to changes if they are achieved by 'the old/existing' practices. If quality is seen as a tool for the survival in the market then we can also say NO to quality measurements and concepts if our actions and

methods keep an institution 'alive'. However, no individual (a teacher, a principal, etc.), educational institution or national educational system can operate as if isolated from the outside world. The problem arises when this stand is taken.

If one says YES to quality in terms of performance indicators and standards, the framework within which he/she operates is structured by the performance indicators, which are constantly audited, measured and evaluated. It is like being caught in determinism of numbers, ranks and positions in the league tables. There is never 'enough' of auditing and of performance indicators developed in the achievement of the ability auditing for the soft elements in the education processes. Measurements and audits, which also need to be audited – an endless loop of auditing to be audited and to become auditable in order to be audited – presumably increase the competitive advantage and enable institutions to be different in terms of their provisions, marketing and product development, yet still within the framework of 'sameness' (credits and structural elements). The whole 'game' is played with and around 'numbers', and creative and challenging education processes focus on meeting the standards.

In order to resolve this determinism – non-determinism position related to audit culture, we would like to reflect on Žižek's (2005, p. 88) discussion about freedom and determinism, in which he refers to Kant's antinomy of freedom. If actions of individuals are completely determined by external 'factors' or causes, then they are not free. If they depend on bare contingency that occasionally cuts the causal chain, they are also not free. Claiming that one is absolutely free is also impossible. Žižek (ibid.) argues that the only way to resolve this antinomy is the individual's ability to retroactively decide and determine which causes determine him/her.

The answer NO in the case of quality does not mean an individual/an institution/a national system can neglect the 'environment' and act 'freely'. Accepting the framework of performance indicators and standards and being led by them does also not lead to what is called in education a 'critical perspective'. Yet answers YES/NO to quality mean that one retroactively decides what means a 'good education', how it can be assessed and evaluated (also measured) and which indicators would be taken into account. And not only this, an individual (individual/institution/system) can assign meaning and interpretations and consequently determine the actions. This retroactivity and reflexivity can be 'useful' for the marketing institutions and for the 'survival', because they enable the development of the 'difference' within the 'sameness'. They also represent the basis on which auditing is assessed and, hopefully, prevented from growing into audit culture of an institution.

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