6-3 Quality Assurance: Aliens, Ghosts and Roundheads

Introduction

"A parallel can be found in the rivalries and relationships between academics and institutional agents – such as quality assurance and enhancement units, learning and teaching groups and committees, Faculty/School and institutional senior management teams. In the field of media studies, the relationships between stakeholders is particularly fraught and seeded with suspicion about various parties' agendas for the future of media education, as is evident in the growing tension between media academics and external stakeholders…" (Kimber, 2013, p.238)

This section of the analysis considers the participant responses from university staff working in both academic media departments and centralised professional services and focuses on their perceptions of formal institutional processes for maintaining academic standards and developing the curriculum and associated teaching, learning and assessment – '*quality assurance and enhancement*'. This aspect of academic practice has been the subject of academic research studies, notably Morley's (2003) work, published as the monograph *Quality and Power in Higher Education* that is "*an examination of the power relations that organize and facilitate quality assurance in higher education*" (ibid. p. vii). Morley observes that:

"Quality assurance involves making distinctions – classifying, segregating, drawing boundaries – dividing people and organisations into categories simultaneously united and separated by similarity and difference. … Some people are authorized to speak authoritatively because others are silenced." (Morley, 2003, p.69)

This rather bleak portrayal of the impact of quality assurance is certainly recognisable within the participant responses within this study but a detailed consideration of the transcripts reveals a more nuanced picture. This group (nine participants) hold rather ambivalent views of quality assurance and enhancement

as an aspect of their academic practice but reveal a recognition of the value of some principles of quality assurance together with a range of 'coping strategies'.

Analysis

These perceptions can then be compared with the public discourse that portrays higher education institutions as changing, negatively, from '*collegiate*' bodies of '*independent scholars*' to '*managerial*', '*hierarchical*', overly '*bureaucratic*', market-oriented service providers (Collini, 2012; Henkel, 2005; Boden and Epstein, 2011; Hoecht, 2006).

These participant responses demonstrate the interactions that occur around the formal approval, monitoring and enhancements of media courses, the ways staff position themselves in relation to these activities and their perceptions of the role and purpose of such formalities. To demonstrate the overall nature of these responses, these first examples alternate between, firstly broadly positive, and then broadly negative views:

> They're inspecting us again, you know, so I, I don't know. I think it does have an impact. I mean, I've got colleagues that see it as a completely alien process and it's kind of like, you know, there's this, ethereal realm where ghosts move and then you've got to live in the real world and I don't believe that per say, I'm much more of your, more of your roundhead opinion, I'm kind of like, you know, you know, you've got to apply the principles of quality, just kind of, I'm more of a Ken Livingstone than a Boris, if you know what I mean [laughter]. (Participant 11)

> There is a level of bureaucracy (angry) (…) and (…) in some of that there is some (…) ticking of boxes such as when you're doing your module review, (…) I have to, at the end of it say how that module contributes to a set of key characteristics which are taken from QAA benchmarks, are taken from the university strategy. (Participant 15)

> Because actually students, people really, really care about students here. And you always, for me that's so helpful because I always return it to, you know, your assessment practices have to be good because of the, what the students feel about it, you know, and it's not fair to the student to do this rather than you must do it because it's right, you know, or 'cause it says so in the regulations or something. (Participant 08)
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> I'm kind of more of a person that's kind of, I'll do something until somebody tells me to stop, rather than finding out the rules first. (Participant 16)
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> If you weren't giving such guidelines you could very easily as a group of people (…..) just concentrate on, on, on very individual items that maybe you are particularly good at and, and leave others out or let's say you know making life easy (happy) and say all I do is, is multiple choice tests. (Participant 12)
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> Yes there is, yes and, you have to sort of submit things to them and there's a panel that sits and they make a decision and they make recommendations and so yeah, it wouldn't just be, I couldn't say right, I think we need research methods, let's do it next year. It has to go through a whole set of form filling and bureaucratic hoops before that's possible. And I think actually, if you wanted to change a core component, you know, something that's compulsory on the degree, I think that has to go, it can't happen until the external validation, which happens again in three or five years. So you couldn't make any big structural changes. (Participant 16)

Participant 11, whilst acknowledging the necessity of the process ("*you've got to apply the principles of quality*"), provides a graphic description of a disconnection that he portrays as a world populated by aliens, ghosts, roundheads, Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson. This theme is echoed by other participants and evokes a quality assurance paradigm of reports, forms, statistics, monitoring and action plans that some participants see as unhelpful in managing a media course on a day-to-day basis. Some of the participant responses go further and assert that quality assurance processes exert a negative influence on the '*real*' quality and standards of their course by slowing the introduction of innovation and new ideas in curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment.

For a view of the '*other side'* of this process, Participant 12, an Academic Registrar in a Post-92 University with responsibility for quality assurance operations expresses her frustrations with the response of academic staff to attempts to make the process quicker and easier:

> "And you know it's all sort of bureaucracy and so forth. (…) And I- I constantly have people, if you give them (…) let's say templates (…) which you, you [slight laugh] put together in order to be supportive and give them the pointers as to what they need to think about (…) they would call this a bureaucracy; if you wouldn't give them the templates (…) they would call this unsupportive and totally arbitrary (angry)." (Participant 12)

Participant 04 (Professor of Media in a Post-92 University) provides a detailed anecdote describing the formal process at his institution for making a minor change to a module title:

> You change a unit, '*Interface Design for the Web*'. <Lecturer name> retitled it '*Designing the Web'*, the next FTQSC <Faculty Teaching Quality Standards Committee> decide that's not a good title and it should be called, '*Designing for the Web*'. And one three letter word, [laughter] and because of a breakdown in communication, I failed to get the forms back in for the next meeting, by which time, it had missed the window for merely being changed by chair's action. It had to be resubmitted which means I had to redo the UChange <Unit Change Form>, the UIF <Unit Information Form> and the CIF <Course Information Form> to include the word 'for' and it's now going, hopefully, if I don't mess it up again, it's going to the February meeting. So we should with a bit of luck by next Autumn, we'll be able to include the word, 'for'. [laughter]. (Participant 04)

His follow-up remarks demonstrate how he sees the formal quality assurance process in relationship to the practical instantiation of the module; irrelevant:

> In theory, we shouldn't be teaching it at the moment because it's not validated. (Participant 04)

A striking feature of this anecdote is the length of time involved in making what appears to be, from an academic point of view, a relatively small change. The rate

of change of course design was also a feature of the response from Participant 15 who, when asked whether she had experience of introducing changes to her course during an interview for this study that took place in mid-2013, remarked in a 'matter-of-fact' way:

> Not really. That might (surprised) be because (…) as I say I've only been involved in teaching since 2007 so I haven't seen a massive change. (confused). (Participant 15)

Given the evolution of the media industries together with the academic research output and developments in teaching, learning and assessment over that period, the relatively unchanged delivery of the course over about six years seems remarkable. But more importantly in this analysis, the participant seems to view this rate of change as normal and unproblematic. This contrasts with a portrayal (Collini, 2012) of contemporary '*managerial*' universities as dynamic, responsive, 'business-like' organisations that respond swiftly to fast-changing economic imperatives and external '*customer*' demands.

Participants 08 and 12 set out a rationale for formal quality assurance processes that is based on the safeguarding of the students' experience of assessment (Participant 08), protection against 'maverick' individual academics (Participant 12) and the prevailing inevitability of such processes (Participant 11). As Collini notes:

"We persuade ourselves that, for all its imperfections, a regime of 'quality assurance' at least provides some check upon idleness, incompetence, and corruption." (Collini, 2012, p.108)

These three participants span across academic roles (08 and 11) and centralised, professional responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement (12). However,

Participants 08 and 11 are both in a Head of Department role and therefore are likely to be accountable for the effective operation of quality assurance processes within their department. This may underlie their response in this area, as they are more likely to see the benefits of such processes in securing external validation of the quality and standards of their media courses – they are *managers* and are formally accountable for the implementation of university policies which may sit awkwardly with the academic aspects of their role. All three responses were based on the value of formal quality assurance as a safeguard against falling standards rather than suggesting an element of quality enhancement in the process, despite significant emphasis being placed on enhancement by the Quality Assurance Agency:

"The processes provide assurance, and identify any problems which need to be resolved, but also enable good practice to be identified, built upon and shared, providing opportunities for continuous improvement of the programme and the student experience. Higher education providers ensure that processes are designed in such a way to enable this balance between assurance and enhancement to be achieved."
(Quality Assurance Agency, 2013, Chapter B8, p.4)

Participants 15 and 16 are Course Leaders and therefore also have an academic leadership role that probably includes responsibility for the implementation of quality assurance processes and procedures in relation to their course. Their responses here show a largely negative perception of quality assurance processes. Both participants refer to the *bureaucratic* nature of the processes.

A common theme among higher education commentators is a perceived negative shift from a university as a collegiate body of autonomous scholars to the organisation of higher education along '*managerial*' lines with an associated

reduction in the autonomy of academic staff. Whilst noting *A History of the University in Europe* (Rüegg, 2004, p.ii) as making the observation that "*The university is the only European institution to have preserved its fundamental patterns and basic social role and function over the course of the last millennium*", Collini (2012, p.22) goes on to describe contemporary universities as "*highly managerial corporate enterprises in which scholars are rather lowly employees*". He elaborates on this to characterise the relationship between academics and their university by using the language of business and enterprise:

> "The experience of being a senior academic now, especially one involved in chairing a department or directing a research centre, may seem to more closely resemble that of being a middle-rank executive in a business organisation than it does that of being an independent scholar or freelance teacher…" (Collini, 2012, p.19)

This section considers the participant responses that shed light on their perceptions of their autonomy and the way they operate as individuals and groups within a corporate higher education institution.

The participants gave some responses that can be seen as indicative of a hierarchical, managerial organisation. For example, when explaining her role in the organisation, Participant 01 (a Teaching Enhancement Developer based within a university centralised teaching and learning unit) defined her position with reference to a hierarchical structure and in relation to another post, whom she describes as "one of her bosses":

> The Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and then that leads straight into the Director of Teaching and Learning who is the Head of the Centre for Learning Excellence. One of my bosses. (Participant 01)

Participant 15 gives a clear indication of an environment where there is a very clear sense of what is '*allowed*' with a depiction of two distinct '*sides*' denoted by *'we' and 'they':*

> "…and then we say "this is what we want to do…can we do it? And they tell us whether we can, by the rules." (Participant 15)

Whilst Participant 15 describes a stark divide between academic staff and professional staff with an audit and regulatory function a consideration of the power in this relationship is shown to be more complex than the "*they tell us whether we can*" of Participant 15 would suggest.

> Technically, no you can't do whatever w- you want. Even though (surprised) for personal projects you know th- the MD, the module definition form is so wide and so they can do whatever you want even in, even if you study film and television production i-if you want to do an installation you can do installation and we had an installation this year… (Participant 07)

Participant 07 (Lecturer, Post-92 University) leads his response with the same general view; "*no you can't do whatever w- you want*" but by proceeding that with "*Technically*" suggests that this is not the complete picture and that there is an alternative. He then elaborates on this with a description of a strategy of deliberate ambiguity in the construction of formal course documentation ("*the module definition form is so wide and so they can do whatever you want*"). This indicates an academic staff tactic of writing a module specification so that it contains the necessary elements to obtain formal approval for delivery but is expressed in a generalised way to allow a range of legitimate interpretations when implemented. There is a further clue to this participant's view of this process in the second part of his phrase ("*they can do whatever you want*"). From the complete response it is clear that here, "*they*" refers to the students and so

the phrase reveals that the participant sees control of the situation as lying with academic staff, "*you*". He does not say, "*they can do whatever **they** want*". He does not see this ambiguity as empowering the students but sees it as a way for academic staff to exercise control over the implementation of a module. In this specific case, the example given by the participant is the interpretation of the module definition for the students' personal project that allows them to produce an 'installation'; a piece of installed artwork even though they are registered on a course in film and television where the personal project is more likely to be expected to produce a piece of work for film and/or television. This participant is working within an art school environment where installation work is probably common within other courses but can be seen here as somewhat subversive.

The perception of power and control amongst academic staff is indicated very clearly in the response of Participant 14 who asserts within the context of his passion for film and film-making:

> "you know what (…) we are going to provide for these people what we think is best (angry), not what government thinks is best for them, what industry thinks is best but what we as (…) university thinks is best for these people. (softly spoken)" (Participant 14)

This response, by making a distinction between government, industry and universities, implies that the views of each are different but asserts the primacy of "*we as university*" in making students aware of a canon of films that has credibility within an academic discourse with little concern for outside influences.

Participant 15 (Course Leader, Russell Group University) describes the process for making changes to her course as:

> Everything has to go through a, a teaching and learning committee (…) and takes (…) approximately (…) between six months and a year to implement so we have to think about these things (…) well in advance. It's- Depart- Departmental level that then reports to a faculty level. But things get (…) rubber stamped at the, at the departmental level, (angry) they go through the director of learning and teaching who holds a committee, all heads of programmes are on the committee and various other positions. And if you want to change anything about a module (…)such as the type of assessment or the amount of lectures you're going to give or (…) the curriculum of that module (…) it has to (…) go beyond- before that committee who considers that that is the right (…) thing to do. (Participant 15)

Again, this features a process that she sees as slow and hierarchical with a suggestion that some of it may be rather perfunctory with a reference to "*rubber stamped*". However, the process described is a collective, essentially academic, decision making activity ("*they go through the director of learning and teaching who holds a committee, all heads of programmes are on the committee and various other positions*", "*it has to (…) go beyond- before that committee who considers that that is the right (…) thing to do.*"). This participant was then invited to elaborate on the role of a centralised, professional university quality assurance service in this process. Significantly, the participant was initially quite confused by this idea, as shown by the dialogue with the interviewer:

> **Interviewer:** Yeah so is, is there a sort of professional (…) direct quality directorate (high tone) type function within the university that (…) sort of oversees these processes, or?
>
> **Participant 15:** Well there's the faculty level (…) teaching and learning committee. (confused)
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah but who- who- is that, but that, that that's academics? (confused)

Participant 15: Yes. (high tone)

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant 15: So you're talking about-

Interviewer: I mean they are sort of professional support staff in their (…) quality (confused) area?

Participant 15: Such as? (confused)

This dialogue suggests collective academic decision-making on a peer-to-peer basis underpins the management of course changes within this department and probably faculty and university rather than a managerial approach. After further clarification, the participant confirms the nature of the input from professional service staff:

> We have administrative staff who are on that committee and who are part of it so (…) yes, there's somebody who I- [sigh] I can't remember her name but she's the- she, she's (…) what you're talking about the, the administrative e-equivalent of the faculty level direct- director of learning and teaching and she will be at all meetings. So if we say "well (…) you know we want to take chairs action to change the exam on this because it's going to do something" (…) you know she'll advise us of the guidelines and policies as to whether we're allowed (…) to do that. (Participant 15)

The participant is aware of the contribution of a person she identifies as "*administrative*" but her response is quite vague as she does not recall the name of this person or their exact job title. She also identifies the contribution of this person as advisory. The impression is one of a collegiate academic process rather than a managerial one – a situation that may be attributable to the institutional context of a large Russell Group university with a long tradition of academically-driven decision making.

Summary and Conclusions

This consideration of the formal interactions of the oppositional discourses of national and institutional '*managerialism'* and academic '*collegiality'* and '*freedom'* provides evidence of the power relationships at work. Academic staff in a variety of media studies settings demonstrate how they have assimilated the discourse of '*quality assurance',* working with institutional colleagues to deliver prescribed outcomes, with some variation across the sector. However, these processes are maintained at arms length through a discourse of distancing; '*aliens'* and '*ghosts'*, demonstrating that power is again in tension and that through discursive practices, media studies academics are capable of 'getting things done', in spite of '*new managerialism'*.