Next Generations, Catwalks, Random Walks and Arms Races: conceptualising the development of quality assurance schemes

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Introduction

Twenty-five years ago it was rare to find European higher education systems that used formal quality assurance instruments. Today, it is hard to find even one among the almost 50 countries which have signed the Bologna Declaration — which specified quality assurance as one of its action lines — that has not established a national system for quality assurance (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010).

The methods used for quality assurance in Europe are diverse: internal and external assessment of programmes or institutions (i.e. evaluations leading to extended reports, usually containing recommendations for improvement), accreditation (distinguished from assessments by a summary yes/no decision regarding acceptability of the evaluated programme or institution), and audit of programmes or institutions (which assesses the functioning of [quality] management rather than the quality of education or research itself). Furthermore, different countries give different interpretations to quality assurance concepts. For example, schemes in the UK are labelled 'audits', yet the actual practices could be interpreted as accreditation. Similarly, while Norway currently has a quality assurance scheme labelled 'accreditation', the procedures are in essence quite similar to those of an institutional audit. An additional difficulty in assessing the literature is that many studies consider changes in quality assurance as if they took place in a bubble, ignoring the intervening factors that could explain why quality assurance development emerged at particular times in particular countries and why these developments may have many different intentions and purposes.

Yet there are some common dynamics associated with the policy change (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004; Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007). In the wider sphere of European higher education policy making, Corbett's study has shown the complex way in which these dynamics play out (Corbett, 2005).

Typically, national quality assurance schemes are managed by a special agency (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). This is consistent with a neo-liberal move to deregulation. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, which, in 2005, had produced European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and in 2008 a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR) is also seen as a factor for change in quality assurance arrangements (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010).

It has often been argued that the establishment and further development of quality assurance schemes involve finding a balance between improvement and accountability (Thune 1996). In this article, we want to move beyond this simple statement of 'finding a balance' and suggest a more complex framework to understand how quality assurance schemes develop. In our framework, we pay attention

to the link between quality assurance and the policy and political contexts surrounding the selection of specific quality assurance methods and schemes. Hence, the aim of this article is to identify and clarify these dynamics of quality assurance in terms that make sense for a comparative study. Accepting that attempts to model policy developments have the advantage of parsimony and the disadvantage of having the evidence squeezed to suit the model (Ragin, 1989), this article conducts the argument in three stages. First, it suggests a typology of change that combines insights from the area of policy analysis and organisational theory. Second, it applies these concepts in brief historical overviews of the development of quality assurance in three countries to provide some empirical illustrations as to how and why quality assurance schemes developed. Third, it discusses the weaknesses and strengths of such a typology in relation to more conventional political science accounts of policy change and suggests approaches for the future.

A Typology of Quality Assurance Policy Strategies

Developing 'pure cases' or 'ideal type constructions' can often help to sharpen analyses. Following this logic, one can deduce from existing scholarship and research in policy analysis that there are two ideal-type positions on the relationship between a policy problem and a policy solution. The first assumes a tight causal link between policy problems and policy solutions (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). This is often termed as a stagist approach, describing the policy process as a series of steps or sequences that is logically derived from information stemming from earlier stages. The second assumes that the link between a particular policy problem and the political solution can be poor, or even non-existent, and emphasises the symbolic and cultural dimensions of political life (March & Olsen, 1989).

Concerning quality assurance, Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2002) provide an example of the former assumption. They argued for a model in which quality assurance policy problems and quality assurance policy solutions were closely linked. The main assumption is that quality assurance schemes operate in a social context in which there is a phased connection between a policy problem and its possible solution. When the first 'quality problem' is solved, a subsequent problem will emerge from the social context and trigger the next phase in the development of quality assurance. The literature provides evidence that such assumptions of a phased process take two forms: one emphasising pedagogical progress, the other political conflict over the ownership of the process (see Stensaker, Westerheijden & Rosa, 2007 for an overview).

In terms of a model of quality assurance policy dynamics, the strand of the quality assurance literature that sees quality assurance as a tool of pedagogic progress can be called '*the next generation*' of quality assurance. It is characterised by the step-wise, non-contentious and perhaps even technical (Skolnik, 2010) improvement of quality assurance schemes designed to improve teaching and learning. It stresses the professional engagement of decision-makers, teaching staff and students aiming for improvement (Harvey & Newton, 2007) and assumes not only harmonious relationships, but also the mutual learning capacities of governments, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions.

Maintaining the assumption that the choice of a particular quality assurance model is linked to a perceived quality assurance problem, a second model draws on the strand of the literature that sees the development of quality assurance processes as part of a struggle for power and influence over the sector (Brennan & Shah,

2000; Skolnik, 2010). Dill and Soo (2004, p. 77) have described such a situation as a quality assurance '*arms race*' between constantly tougher and sharper quality assurance schemes and an inventive sector that tries to defend, shield and buffer itself from the threatening surroundings (Stensaker, Westerheijden & Rosa, 2007) by increasingly clever avoidance manoeuvres (e.g. offloading quality assurance to specialised professional but non-academic offices), superficial compliance and perverse effects (e.g. salami-publishing, Westerheijden, 2008), window dressing or outright political struggle (as when the Russell Group revolted against the teaching quality assessments by UK's QAA in 2001).

The alternative perspective drops the assumption of close links between quality assurance arrangements and actual problems to be solved. The implicit motive is actors gaining and maintaining legitimacy for which policies may be a symbolic vehicle (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In line with the symbolic and cultural significance of policy, this alternative focuses on isomorphic process (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) and appropriate political behaviour (March & Olsen, 1989). The adoption of quality assurance schemes becomes a process of copying instruments and policies that exist elsewhere, or to legitimate political action regardless of its actual effect. Sometimes political action takes place under what is in effect coercion (stating, e.g.: 'European standards require *x*'), mimetic pressure ('all other countries in the Bologna Process have *x*') or normative pressure ('all quality assurance experts say *x*'). Hood (1998, p. 172) nicely summarised this situation as: 'shifts in what counts as received ideas in public management works through a process of fashion and persuasion, not through proofs couched in a strict deductive logic, controlled experiments, or even systematic analysis of available cases'. Birnbaum (2000) used a terminology of management fads, and Stensaker (2007), coming back to Hood, modelled this process of diffusing quality assurance schemes in higher education as 'fashion'.

For this article, the significance of this perspective is that quality assurance schemes are a means of achieving external legitimation. It assumes that politicians and external stakeholders also are accountable for their actions to an audience that does not have expert knowledge to judge the effectiveness and efficiency of policies. Whether a quality assurance model actually solves quality problems in higher education is less important than whether it looks good and fashionable in the eyes of the relevant constituencies.

As with the stagist perspective, the symbolic perspective comes in two versions. One model emphasises broad consensual views on what constitutes 'good management'. Good management aims to demonstrate 'modernity', 'progress' and 'efficiency' and must thus adapt to changing contexts (Abrahamson 1996; Stensaker, 1998). Pursuing the fashion metaphor, we call this the *'catwalk'* model — the ostentatious display of 'modern' characteristics. Fashion in policy is related to the exogenous political context and is subject to change as a consequence of electoral and governmental changes. The 'catwalk' model assumes that there is an audience (constituency) with a more or less uniform taste watching the performance: fashion on the catwalk must look good according to certain taken-for-granted characteristics (Stensaker, 2007).

However, in the order of things in the real world, higher education is not an object about which audiences mostly agree. Often, the general audience hardly watches and whatever happens on stage is of little interest to the public image of decision-makers, but if it does, stakeholder groups holding different (ideological, political) opinions sway the tastes of (parts of) the general audience. In other

words, different actors or stakeholders vying for legitimacy use quality assurance models as symbols or even bargaining tools, and consequently for quality assurance schemes, model choices may become random, depending on what is needed to obtain political legitimacy in a particular situation. Accordingly, we call this a '*random walk*' model (Stensaker, Westerheijden & Rosa 2007) in a metaphor to resemble the catwalk, though this model shares many similarities with the 'garbage can model' (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972).

We are aware that in defining a matrix of these four models we have sketched only one of many possible ways to organise them. However, in the interests of experiment, we use our four categories to identify four different explanations as to how quality assurance schemes develop (Figure 1). The first dimension has been described before as varying from a close relationship between quality assurance models and the social problems to be solved on the left to a de-coupled relation between the two on the right. The other dimension of the matrix concerns the degree of politicisation: from consensual or harmonious views on the top to more conflictual or strongly politicised relationships at the bottom.
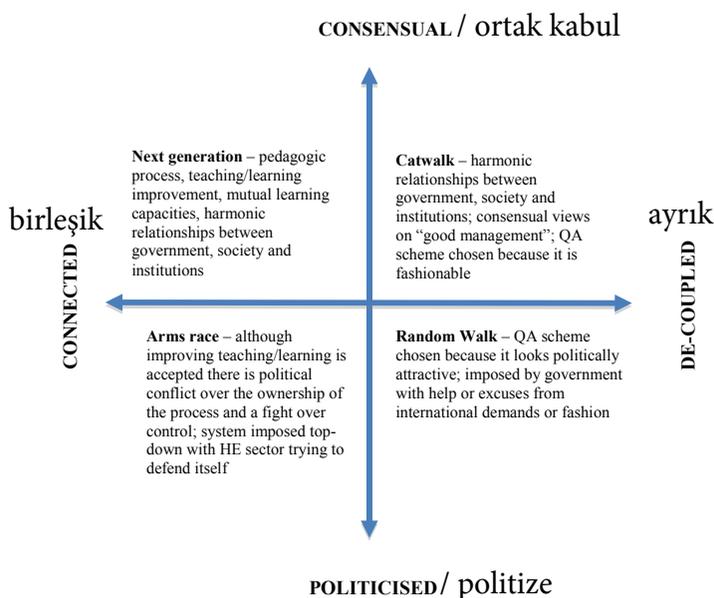

FIGURE 1. An explanatory model of the development of quality assurance policy

Applying the Model to the Development of Quality Assurance in The Netherlands, Norway and Portugal

In this section, we attempt to apply our typology to the development of quality assurance schemes in three countries over the past 20 to 25 years. They are the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal, a choice justified by pointing to their variation in three respects. First, they are geographically diverse so as to avoid the problem of neighbouring countries tending to develop joint characteristics (Stensaker, 2000). They differ with respect to political culture, history, and policy styles. Second, they have very different higher education systems. While the Netherlands was a strict binary system with a sharp, almost insurmountable distinction between

universities and colleges (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2004), Norway had a much more integrated system, blurring the boundaries between the two types of institutions (Stensaker, 2004). The Portuguese system was characterised by its large number of private higher education institutions (Amaral & Rosa, 2004). Third, the three countries differed in terms of when they first adopted a quality assurance policy (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004).

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, there were three main phases in the development of quality assurance until 2011:
- 1985–2002: Government remained at a distance. Umbrella organisations of higher education institutions co-ordinated their own evolving national schemes. *Main method: programme evaluation.*
- 2003–2010: Internationalisation phase. New, bi-national co-ordination agency (Dutch-Flemish established by law), spurred by the Bologna Process. *Main method: programme accreditation.*
- From 2011: Refinement of accreditation. Efficiency-enhancing measures and effort to regain improvement perspective, within the same broad framework. *Main methods: programme accreditation and institutional audit.*

The early development of Dutch quality assurance policy fits the 'next generation' model. In 1985, the Dutch government produced a White Paper 'Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality' to introduce institutional self-regulation. It was a reaction to a politically turbulent period in which *ad hoc* committees had been instituted to recommend specific budget cuts, including closing some university faculties.

The government's intention in distancing itself from the process was to let the semi-independent Inspectorate of Education coordinate the quality assurance process. But the institutions' umbrella bodies, VSNU and HBO-Council, gained control over the scheme (Westerheijden, 1990). Higher education institutions formulated clear goals and, in pursuit of best international practice, university managers held a 'beauty contest'. The outcome was the agreement to adopt the improvement-oriented US approach of programme self-evaluation and external evaluation of institutions, rather than the then newly-established UK approach of programme assessments. Colleges, which had just merged into four-year bachelor institutions out of small vocational schools, at first favoured an institutional approach, but later opted for programme evaluation as more appropriate for the newly-established institutions. Following intermediate evaluations (Inspectie Hoger Onderwijs, 1992; Frederiks, Westerheijden & Weusthof, 1994), the method was incrementally adapted in 1993 to become more closely monitored by the State in order to ensure a better follow-up of improvement recommendations by the higher education institutions.

But from around 1999, there was a 'catwalk' effect, resulting in the policy change in 2003. Accreditation of study programmes took pride of place. Already in 1998, the HBO-Council had started a pilot in programme accreditation in response to dwindling trust among employers and politicians in what was suddenly called the 'soft' previous quality assurance scheme (Goedegebuure *et al.*, 2002). But the major change came with the 1999 Bologna Declaration. Although the Declaration did not mention accreditation, the term was buzzing all around. When the Dutch Minister of Education returned from Bologna in 1999, the word went

out almost immediately: the quality assurance scheme must follow the new fashion among the Bologna countries and become accreditation. Many policy players expected that the Bologna Declaration would encourage national governments to weed out underperforming programmes in the name of international compatibility and of the usefulness of accreditation status for stimulating mobility. More rationalisations were found specifically for the Netherlands during further policy-making, focusing on international recognition.

After gaining experience with the accreditation system, a further policy change that took effect in 2011 is again best explained by the next generation model. Processes were streamlined and gained a more institutional focus after persistent complaints from the sector about the 'bureaucracy' of the first accreditation round. Moreover, the improvement focus, lost in the binary accreditation decision, was re-emphasised by allowing for a longer 'repair period' and by stressing the peer review character of site visits. International fashions may have played some role (e.g. Germany's also introducing more efficient, institution-oriented accreditation models), but, on the whole, the changes were made in response to complaints about objective failures from within the higher education sector.

Norway

The development of quality assurance in Norway can be divided into three phases:
- 1991–1996: No national intermediate body, national quality assurance schemes characterised by methodological experimentation and a research-informed process. *Main method: assessment of study programmes.*
- 1997–2003: The establishment of a national intermediate body, national quality assurance schemes characterised by greater professionalisation at the national level. *Main method: audit of higher education institutions.*
- 2004-present: The establishment of a formally independent quality assurance agency, national quality assurance schemes characterised by greater focus on quality work inside higher education institutions, and by establishing similar regulatory framework conditions between public and private providers. *Main method: accreditation/audit of the quality assurance schemes of the higher education institutions.*

Traditionally, higher education in Norway has been a sector with little conflict between the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions (Aamodt, Kyvik & Skoie, 1991). But in the early 1990s, a large influx of students caused concern about academic standards (Aamodt, 1995) and led to numerous reforms. National quality assessments were undertaken for the first time. We characterise the first phase of development as inspired by the 'catwalk' — the Dutch evaluations were seen as attractive and modern, but quality assurance in Norway was poorly linked to the complex web of policy change, addressing quality, efficiency and effectiveness issues that they were intended to support. The government, motivated by effectiveness and efficiency, amalgamated 98 small regional colleges into 26 larger state colleges. Beyond the economies of scale triggered by this reform, the government also introduced changes in funding systems, result-oriented planning, and management by objectives. The authorities wanted to stimulate institutional specialisation in teaching and research to avoid duplication of study and research programmes. Competition was not considered as important as the development of strong academic units and institutions.

The development of the quality assurance scheme in Norway in this period (1991–1996) can largely be interpreted along the 'catwalk' model — political stability and consensus combined with a quality assurance scheme that was greatly inspired by international developments that were closely related to the government's aims. In this period, political authorities launched a five-year evaluation project. The two ambitions were to evaluate study programmes in business administration, mathematics, engineering, sociology, etc. and to learn from the evaluations undertaken and disseminate knowledge about evaluation and quality work in Norwegian higher education (Stensaker, 1997). The inspiration was the Dutch evaluation scheme launched a few years earlier. However, there were very few attempts to articulate how and why these evaluations would lead to expected outcomes (Stensaker, 2000).

The second phase, 1997–2003, was characterised by much more stability in terms of reform in the sector. No major political initiative was taken to change the sector, although the problems concerning quality, efficiency and effectiveness had not been 'solved' in the previous phase. In 1997, the government created an advisory body, the Norwegian Network Council, with quality assurance as part of its responsibilities. In addition, a public commission produced a White Paper in 2001, proposing comprehensive change in Norwegian higher education, not least with respect to greater institutional autonomy. In line with these initiatives, the Norway Network Council launched a series of institutional audits of all universities. These audits derived from extensive deliberations between the sector and the Norway Network Council with the intention of supporting the drive for greater institutional autonomy (Stensaker, 2004). This coupling of initiatives fits the 'next generation' model.

In the years following the 2001 white paper, Norway launched a number of comprehensive reforms in higher education, including a new degree structure and grading system, changes in the governance of higher education institutions, a new funding scheme, and a new quality assurance scheme.

A quality assurance body, NOKUT, was established in 2004 with a brief to accredit institutions and programmes and to approve institutional quality assurance schemes. This can be said to be the starting point for the third phase. However, the introduction of accreditation in Norway was mainly related to a shift of government, with a Centre-Conservative government replacing the Social Democrats. Although there were arguments that accreditation would secure student interests and adjust Norwegian practices to European standards — an argument supporting a 'catwalk' model — there are many indications that a very important reason for choosing accreditation was to provide similar framework conditions for public and private higher education institutions (Stensaker, 2004). The institutional accreditation régime adopted in Norway fits an underlying political ambition to provide similar framework conditions for public and private providers rather than to support student interests. Public providers of higher education mainly accepted the new accreditation framework because it also facilitated institutional drift in the sector where higher education institutions could climb the hierarchy from college to university status. Hence, the development in the period from 2004 onwards fits the 'random walk' model where political bargaining, ideology and the political solution are closely intertwined.

Portugal

The history of quality assurance in Portugal can be divided into two phases:

- 1992–2006: Government at a distance. Umbrella organisation co-ordinates the national quality assurance scheme, above which are placed the entities that represent higher education institutions from the public university, public polytechnic and private sectors. *Main method: programme evaluations*.
- 2006–present: The former system was dismantled and a new one was designed, based on an accreditation approach. Internationalisation/Europeanisation phase, in agreement with the Bologna Process. A national co-ordination agency was established by law, the Evaluation and Accreditation Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. *Main methods: institutional and programme accreditation.*

Our argument is that phase one can be subsumed under the 'next generation' model, but that as from 2006, the Portuguese government adopted a new system, the 'random walk', not for its intrinsic merit in improving quality assurance, but because it looked more attractive from a political perspective. In Portugal's binary higher education system, comprising public and private institutions, quality assurance was initially a consensual issue. The passing of Autonomy Acts (for public universities in 1988, and public polytechnics in 1990), the questionable quality of the rapidly developing private sector, and European trends (to set up quality assessment systems) in general contributed to an agreement in principle to a quality assurance scheme (Rosa, Tavares & Amaral, 2006).

Public universities regarded quality evaluation as a guarantee of their quality vis-à-vis the private sector. Hence, the Portuguese Council of Rectors took the lead in implementing a quality assurance scheme. In 1992, a seminar on evaluation was organised with the participation of experts from the Netherlands, France and the UK. In the light of a comparative analysis, the Council of Rectors favoured the Dutch system, mainly because of its emphasis on quality improvement, the recognition that higher education institutions should be responsible for the quality assurance scheme, and its compatibility with the University Autonomy Act (Amaral & Rosa, 2004).

The Portuguese University Foundation (FUP) was then created and became responsible for the quality assurance scheme for public universities. These initiatives were taken in consultation with the Ministry of Education, and, in 1994, the Parliament passed the *Law of Quality Evaluation*. The character of the system led to the creation of two more evaluation councils, one for the public polytechnic institutes and the other for private institutions, covering the three sub-systems of evaluation. The National Evaluation Council for Higher Education (CNAVES) was created in 1998 to co-ordinate these, ensure their harmony and cohesion and carry out a meta-evaluation. The aim of the scheme implemented in 1993 was to assess the quality of higher education institutions' programmes through self-assessment followed by an external assessment conducted by a committee of independent experts.

A first assessment cycle took place between 1995 and 2000 and a second one between 2000 and 2005. The improvement perspective, which had been at the origin of the quality assurance scheme, appeared stronger in the first cycle; in the second, more accountability elements were introduced: a rating scale scheme was tested. However, this never worked as planned, due to inconsistencies amongst

reports. But, overall, the quality assurance scheme was developed, based on consensus among professional actors, with the goal of genuinely solving 'quality problems'.

The second phase seems to have been triggered by the government which complained that external review reports were obscure, seldom offering a basis to decide to cancel poor quality programmes (Rosa, Tavares & Amaral, 2006). In 2003, Parliament passed a law establishing an additional 'academic accreditation', adding a new type of monitoring to the existing one. This new scheme was not immediately put in place and, in 2005, a new Ministry asked the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to appoint an international team to review Portuguese quality assurance practices and make recommendations for the future. The ENQA report was published in November 2006 and during the review process the government announced its decision to dismantle the former quality assurance scheme.

This dismantling led to a new phase of quality assurance in Portugal which was largely influenced by the developments in the European arena, in particular the Bologna Declaration. The government decided that the new quality assurance scheme should be designed to be internationally recognised. It should follow the ENQA report's recommendations (ENQA 2006) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). It is also a phase that was much more influenced by the government than by the higher education institutions: consensus (which was the basis of the previous 'contractual model', prevalent in the first phase) was replaced by a more politicised higher education system, in line with the 'random walk' model. Accordingly, in 2007, two fundamental regulations were passed by Parliament: the *Legal Framework for the Evaluation of Higher Education* (Act 38/2007 of 16 August), which established new procedures for quality assurance in higher education, including assessment and accreditation, and the Decree-Law 369/2007 of 5 November, creating the *Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education*. In this new system, accreditation assumes a preponderant role as a way to ensure that study cycles and institutions achieved minimum requirements leading to their official recognition.

Findings and Conclusions

Although data from three countries only provide limited empirical evidence, we can see that there is no established common pattern regarding the style and content of quality assurance schemes (Figure 2).

Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows some interesting commonalities in the development of quality assurance in the period studied. In each of the three countries, the history of quality assurance policy has shifted between stagist and symbolic perspectives in which political legitimacy has been variously combined with managerialist ambitions and with political wishes to be in line with the perceived Bologna mainstream. We emphasise 'perceived' because, in many respects, the Bologna Process does not set uniform standards but is explicitly intended to maintain diversity as long as compatibility is achieved. This leaves room for countries to make discretionary choices, thus for fashion, or its own path dependence (folklore dress — to maintain the fashion metaphor). This is supported by studies on other aspects of the Bologna Process which also emphasise that it entails changes in national higher education policies, but not necessarily towards uniformity (Witte, 2006; Sursock & Smidt, 2010; Veiga, 2010).
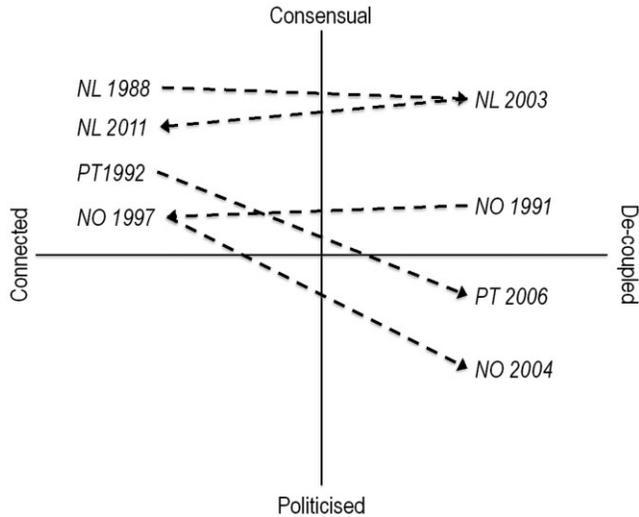
FIGURE 2. Models of quality assurance development in three countries

From our limited exercise, we can conclude that the development of higher education policy, exemplified here by quality assurance policies, may derive from different motivations and shed more light on the different logics underlying it. Problem solving, following fashion, and political tactics that seem random from a more strategic perspective all played a role. Had we been able to include the UK in our analysis, we would also, in all probability, have seen examples of an arms race. By focusing on the two dimensions of problem-solving connectedness and politicisation, we were also able to go beyond some analyses in terms of institutional isomorphism. The neo-institutional analyses that stress isomorphic forces (Meyer & Rowan 1977, etc.) are most akin to our 'catwalk' model and therefore occupy only one of our four quadrants.

The history of quality assurance illustrates its political dimension: politics and quality are closely intertwined. The recurrent shifts may indicate that those in charge of the design and implementation of quality assurance schemes feel accountability pressures, and that the need to do *something* — the 'don't-just-stand-there-but-do-something' syndrome — sometimes outweighs reflection and the sustainable development of existing quality assurance schemes. They also indicate that quality assurance is a tool that can be used ideologically, or as a means in political bargaining processes, because of the often poor understanding of the relationship between a policy problem and the policy solution. Given the difference between the three countries in their system characteristics, history and political culture, a common characteristic seems to be that accountability pressures have been more important so far.

We can also conclude that different logics reigned in each of the countries at different moments: we did not find that countries adhered to consistent policy styles. There are no 'dedicated followers of fashion', nor dedicated followers of rational (stagist) problem solving, at least in our small sample. Whether the pattern of alternation between problem-solving logics and more overtly political logics is also to be found in other countries (inside or outside Europe) would be an interesting issue to pursue. However, if there are countries that break with the

alternating pattern, it would be most interesting to study the conditions that create stability in the development paths of quality assurance schemes.

A second point, related to the first, is that the relationship between quality assurance agencies and the State in all three countries studied is sometimes characterised by poor or even non-existent communication. The alternation between stagist and more symbolic perspectives indicates that empirical knowledge on the functioning and effectiveness of various quality assurance schemes only occasionally influences the decision-making processes: policy-making remains 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959). This is perhaps not surprising, but is still a paradox, since all the agencies were created on the basis that they should represent central expertise in the field. That this expertise is only listened to occasionally may indicate that the agencies are still young and vulnerable and have not established the legitimacy they would like to have. The shifts between the various models would also suggest that the classical improvement versus accountability dilemma remains a constant problem to be tackled, as new quality assurance schemes will probably tilt the existing balance.

A third point touches upon the issue of international influences on policy development. An indication of this is that all three quality assurance schemes over the years have evolved towards accreditation. Whether this reflects the power of the Bologna Process on quality assurance developments in Europe, or globalisation more generally remains a moot point. As mentioned before, the 1999 Bologna Declaration did not evoke accreditation. The term 'accreditation' is certainly the new fashion of quality assurance in Europe, but the question is how to interpret this. As stated earlier in this article, certain labels can be used to denote very different practices (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004) and one should be open to the possibility that 'accreditation' may be a label, legitimised by its international flavour, while, in practice, it is used in different ways to solve domestic problems, as the Norwegian case has illustrated. However, this could have implications for our theoretical model and would suggest that the boundaries between stagist and symbolic perspectives are not as clear-cut as was sketched. With respect to the example above, while introducing accreditation is an example of 'catwalk' adaptation, domestic motives for implementation of accreditation would suggest that it is really about creating the 'next generation' of quality assurance. In a similar vein, one could imagine the blurring of 'arms race' and 'random walk' solutions. Not least, a 'random walk'-initiated quality assurance scheme could trigger an 'arms race' response from the sector. Our current findings of alternation between tight and loose coupling between policy problems and policy solution do not suggest that one perspective prevails, but the theoretical example just mentioned suggests that symbolic actions could easily escalate into political struggles, while it may be hard to de-escalate the process once an 'arms race' has begun.

During our analysis, we discussed regularly with each other if a certain policy change had best be interpreted as an example of 'catwalk' or of 'random walk'. This points to a limitation of our model and methodology. Using an ideal type reasoning helps to uncover *tendencies and mechanisms*, but realities never *are* ideal types in themselves. They are always mixes and the analytical question becomes which tendencies (in plural) can be found and which are the most important at any moment of time?

Finally, we realise that what we have presented is a descriptive model, which does not explain why, at any moment in any country, one or the other model is

applicable. Our article did show that one theory was not sufficient to explain the sequence of policy models — which may be expected to apply not just to quality assurance, but also to policy making in general — and that more theoretical work is needed to develop an explanatory theory that integrates the different approaches around isomorphism, rational policy development, political decision-making and garbage can decision-making models.

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