



A qualitative study of student feedback : Lecturers' and Students' perception experiences

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**A Qualitative Study of Student Feedback:
Lecturers' and Students'
Perceptions and Experiences**

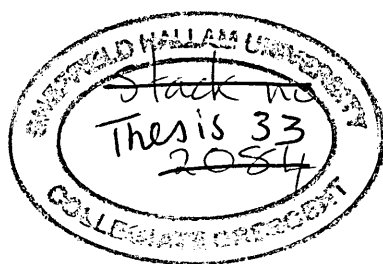
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requirements of
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ABSTRACT

The thesis has two aims. First to conceptualise the meaning of the idea and practice of 'student feedback' on teaching and learning in higher education (HE). Second, to assess the effectiveness of 'student feedback' in respect of both students' and lecturers' communicative relations and needs and the aims of the contemporary HE policy agenda.

Students and lecturers from a variety of HE institutions and subject disciplines were interviewed about their own perceptions and experiences of the purpose, process and demands of 'student feedback'. Analyses and discussion of these data are structured in respect of conclusions drawn from a comprehensive and critical appraisal of the intentions, assumptions and values expressed within HE government policy texts and documents issued by HE statutory agencies in the period 1987-1997. In these texts the idea and practice of 'student feedback' is located within a set of aims symbolised by, and implemented through, the concept 'quality'. 'Quality' is used to progress:

- * efficient and effective management of HE institutions;
- * a reorientation of academic cultures, practices and values;
- * the reduction of professional autonomy, power and control through enforced institutional and national accountability procedures;
- * the representation and empowerment of the student as 'customer';
- * a reorientation of the purpose of (the) higher education (curriculum);
- * summative and formative evaluation of professional practice in HE teaching.

The thesis finds that the student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ) is the dominant method used to elicit students' views on teaching and learning; it is also the subject of greatest interest within empirical research and management texts. The methodological and epistemological premises of the SEQ are compatible with the concept and strategy of 'quality' expressed in HE policy. The SEQ meets the explicit requirements of institutional

and national accountability procedures and the practical exigencies consequent on the implementation of these requirements within institutions.

Analysis of students' and lecturers' views on the communicative value of the SEQ highlights its inadequacies in respect of dialogue, expression and explanation. Analysis also stresses how students and lecturers experience teaching-learning as a complex, contingent, social and contextual process. Discussion illustrates how the SEQ generates conflict, divisions and tension both at an inter-personal level and within the educational process, and is also a reductionist evaluative practice that is experienced as unhelpful, confusing and disempowering. Lecturers and students associate the SEQ with the 'quality' agenda; narratives in which the SEQ is perceived as a bureaucratic, management-enforced burden on time and administrative resources relate to the controversial nature of this agenda, and yet also conflate with the negative experience of the SEQ.

Analysis and discussion expose the letter of policy and statutory texts as legitimating rhetoric, and reveal both the contradictions in, and the inadequate conceptual basis of, the 'quality' agenda. Key issues are: the conditions that provide for student voice and empowerment within decision making and educational processes of teaching-learning; the commitment, values and motivations that underpin and progress professionalism and professional practice in teaching; and, the conditions that provide for support, development and reassurance within the formative activities of both student learning and the enhancement of teaching practice.

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Student feedback aims to bring cultural change within higher education through structures and techniques that restrict the autonomy and power of academic professionals. This will counter the alleged unresponsive and inward focus of the collegial academy. Students and lecturers imply that student feedback has been incorporated and integrated within universities in terms that are compatible with the existing culture: student feedback is a weak agent of change; it is a familiar part of the status 'quo'.

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Student feedback is used to gauge the student's levels of satisfaction with their course and the experience of higher education. The student's satisfaction is assumed to reflect an instrumental interest in studying, in terms of future employability. Lecturers contest these concepts in the

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These interests are motivated out of loyalty to the student's development.

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Student feedback is asserted as a means by which the lecturer can inform their professional practice in teaching. The student evaluation questionnaire reflects a technician and competence-based idea of professional development. It is suited to managerial interests in assessing

the performance of lecturing staff; and the dominant practice of student feedback. For lecturers this summative means of evaluation is both threatening and devoid of informational or process value. Lecturers describe the enhancement of teaching as a deliberative process in which many different forms and sources of information, and many potential solutions, are subject to exploration and negotiation, in collaboration with both peers and students, on a longitudinal future-oriented basis. Students' desires for discursive, open and inter-personal exchange with lecturers is suited to the lecturers' interests yet not facilitated by the student evaluation questionnaire.

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PREFACE

Twice two is not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death

Gentlemen, of course I'm joking, and I know I am not doing it very successfully, but you know you mustn't take everything I say for a joke. I may be joking with clenched teeth. Gentlemen, there are some questions that torment me; answer them for me. For example, here you are wanting to wean man from his old habits and correct his will to make it conform to the demands of science and common sense. But how do you know that you not only can, but ought to remake man like that? ... All respectable ants begin with the ant-hill and they will probably end with it too, which does great credit to their constancy and their positive character. But man is a fickle and disreputable creature and perhaps, like a chess-player, is interested in the process of attaining his goal rather than the goal itself. And who knows, (nobody can say with certainty), perhaps man's sole purpose in this world consists in this uninterrupted process of attainment, or in other words in living, and not specifically in the goal, which of course must be something like twice two is four, that is a formula; but after all, twice two is not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death.

Notes From Underground F. Dostoevsky; trns. Coulson, J. (pp. 39-40).

Lecturer

It is a worry I have about it. You know how do, how do you How do you actually- Can you get anywhere near an objective quantification of what has actually been taught and learnt and absorbed within a class, or within a course or whatever? ... I think it's the same thing as I was saying about being a lecturer, I mean am I in a position to analyse what teaching should be? You know I don't know what 'it' is. There's this attitude either you can do it or you can't, but I haven't got much exposure to it, I haven't had much exposure to it and different sorts of teaching and whatever.

For what it is it gets a good mark, or whatever. And therefore the lecturer looks at the result and thinks "I've got a good mark, I don't need to do anything". It's informing my practice in as much as it's reinforcing my practice, "I'll just carry on just doing the same thing". And that is self-perpetuating as well I think, or can be. But I, you know these are all sort of doubts and questions I have about it which I haven't got any answers to I must admit. Because I just go on handing these out every year at the end of the course, and getting them back and being very pleased.

Student

It's difficult because we should be in a position to change some of it, but it's difficult- Especially the ones that don't give out evaluation forms, or sometimes you think they give out evaluation forms but you don't know what they do with them or how much they accept the information that's on it.

I think the evaluation things are good, but I think that they should have a discussion- Like seminars and things you should have an actual discussion on- I think a 1 to 5 basis doesn't always work ... if you have got these questions then discussing them, rather than just putting a 3 down or a 2 down and then not saying why you put it as a 2 or why you put it as a 5- You know it doesn't answer the question if it says, 'Was it very interesting?', and you say, 'No!', it doesn't solve any problems because they don't know why it hasn't been interesting or they don't know why you haven't learnt anything. You do, but they don't. You know so you're not helping the situation really. And that annoys me sometimes when I see that. And I think I've known when lecturers have got whole wads of them, that are appallingly bad, you know.

The real is a closely woven fabric

I cannot put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications. My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is not incompatible with that context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality in the realm of the imaginary. If the reality of my perception were based solely on the intrinsic coherence of 'representations', it ought to be forever hesitant and ... I ought to be ceaselessly taking apart misleading syntheses, and reinstating in reality stray phenomena which I had excluded in the first place. But this does not happen. The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination.

The Phenomenology of Perception; M. Merleau-Ponty (1962:x).

Quality is just the focal point around which a lot of intellectual furniture is getting rearranged¹

It wasn't any particular point of view that outraged him so much as the idea that Quality should be subordinated to any point of view.

The intellectual process was forcing Quality into its servitude, prostituting it ...

What they smack their lips on is the putrescence of something they long ago killed². ...

Phaedrus wrote, ... 'Squareness may be succinctly and yet thoroughly defined as an inability to see quality before it's been intellectually defined, that is, before it gets all chopped up into words.

We have proved that quality, though undefined, exists.

Its existence can be seen empirically in the classroom, and can be demonstrated logically by showing that a world without it cannot exist as we know it³.

... the referent of a term that can split a world into

hip and square, classic and romantic, technological and humanistic,

is an entity that can unite a world already split along these lines into one⁴.

... by subtracting Quality from a picture of the world as we know it, he'd revealed a magnitude of importance of this term he hadn't known was there.

The world *can* function without it, but like would be so dull as to be hardly worth living.

In fact it wouldn't be worth living. The term *worth* is a Quality term.

Life would just be living without any values at all⁵.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values; R. M. Pirsig.

¹ p. 118

² p. 207

³ p. 213

⁴ p. 217

⁵ p. 211

INTRODUCTION

0.1. What is Student Feedback?

Each of the following four conceptualisations of 'student feedback' characterises the nature, purpose and functioning of student feedback according to perspectives found within texts issued by statutory higher education agencies, research reports and literature oriented to university teachers. Each reflects, and is informed by different sets of beliefs and interests that constitute different *concepts* of student feedback; each set of beliefs and interests produces a different understanding of what student feedback is, how it functions, what it is for, and why it is of value. Brief descriptions are followed by critiques, based on the implications and contradictions reflected within each perspective on student feedback.

0.1.1. The exchange of information in an educational setting

Student feedback is a device used to engage students and lecturers in an *information gathering exercise*, focused on students' opinions about how a curriculum has been taught, and about the perceived impact of this teaching on the student's learning and experiences of learning. Student feedback is an activity that produces information for the lecturer concerned, or a means for a departmental manager to learn about a particular lecturer, their teaching or course. At times students' views are themselves

taken as direct judgement of the lecturer, teaching or course; at others student feedback is understood as one source of information on which the lecturer, course or departmental manager can reflect, in order to reach judgement of the lecturer, teaching or course. Whether the information is considered of value in its own right, or as information for analysis, the assumption is that student feedback is useful as a signal. It signals, to the lecturer or manager, that action needs to be taken in respect of the lecturer, the teaching or the course.

From this perspective, the concept of student feedback is that of post-hoc appraisal of an activity and experience undergone. The purpose of the *information gathering exercise* is to identify and remedy negative aspects of a course and the way it is taught. Student feedback is of benefit only to successive students: it is not an intervention in the teaching-learning process; it is an event anterior to the educational experience and external to the educational setting. Student feedback serves to manipulate teaching-learning from outwith the educational activity: the information gathering exercise is not valued for the impact of the process on the participants involved.

0.1.2. An Institutional Framework

Student feedback is a *systematic activity*, functional within and structured by a wider institutional management framework. This perspective derives from the demands of government policy; policy requires institutions to implement and operate explicit, documented systems and tools of management. These have to produce documentary

evidence of their own functioning. The documentation is used during external audits and assessments of institutional practices in management and teaching-learning. Audit focuses on the management framework, and assessment on the practices which that management framework structures and is assumed to facilitate. Policy, audit and assessment assume a relationship between management and educational performance; they are founded on the belief that this bureaucratic-rational form of management is suited to the demands of higher educational practice.

Student feedback is an instrument of management that is structured and implemented according to the wider institutional management framework. It must therefore operate systematically and must produce information in documented form. It must give rise to information that can be aggregated and used both in comparison, and as evidence of its own operation and effectiveness. The assumption is that information that is generated as documented, standardised aggregates is a meaningful, fair and comprehensive overview of institutional managerial and educational practice, and is meaningful and useful for reaching judgements about the relative efficiency within, and across, institutions.

0.1.3. A Political Tool

Student feedback is a *political intervention*: student feedback is a symbol of the government policy programme and is a functional device within it. As a political tool, student feedback reflects and serves political values, interests and goals. It is one

instrument of an agenda that seeks to effect change within higher education institutions and the higher education system, and in the relationship of higher education to its socio-economic context. Student feedback is both 'sign of the times' and externally enforced tool that seeks external leverage over the internal workings and goals of higher education institutions.

Student feedback represents and enables the operation of ideologically informed and motivated interests. It is compatible with the belief in the power of market forces and the rights and agency of the consumer. It functions by constructing and effecting marketised relations and behaviours, and by subjecting institutions to forces of demand, supply and price sensitivity.

Student feedback is a hybrid of both consumer complaint mechanism and market survey. The student, identified as a consumer, has a right to complain and a right of redress, and makes choices about brands and products - institutions and courses - on the basis of information elicited from past consumers. In order to maintain price and income levels, brand image and competitiveness, the institution will supply according to demand, and will change in relation to perceived consumer preferences.

Student feedback is a device used, under the rhetorical guise of 'empowerment', to legitimate the introduction of external audit and assessment. Student feedback is used to generate information for statutory judgements; audit and assessment give rise for further signals to the consumer. In this sense, student feedback operates within a *quasi-market*. The *quasi-market* contradicts the rhetoric of 'empowerment' because both

judgements, and criteria for judgement, are controlled by statutory agencies, not the student.

0.1.4 A Research Method

Student feedback is a *research method*. Academic inquiry into the design, development and application of student feedback as a research tool focuses on the validity and reliability of students' responses, the criteria used and on the definition and identification of 'bias'. Alternatively, student feedback is considered as technology; interests focus on the optimisation of procedures, techniques and systems. In both cases research conceptualises student feedback as, and researches into, the student evaluation questionnaire.

The questionnaire reflects epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions about teaching and learning. Questions of validity, reliability, the proper criteria and 'bias' are considered in respect of the assumption that education process such as teaching and learning are available to objectification and disaggregation into discrete, universal and causally related variables.

0.2 Aims of this Study

The research I have undertaken to date encompasses methodological, theoretical and empirical analysis and interpretation; this work now results in a study that pursues two lines of enquiry.

First, Section Two develops such that, taken as a whole, it provides *conceptualisation* of student feedback in respect of the perceptions and experiences of students and lecturers.

Second, each chapter of Section Two focuses on one strand of the government policy agenda and the assumptions, interests and ambitions within that strand. Within each chapter I assess how student feedback has been incorporated into higher education and discuss the impact it has had in respect of both policy intentions, and students' and lecturers' experiences of university work, study and organisation. Within both lines of enquiry the meaning and impact of student feedback is contextualised by, and considered in relation to the institutional, social-relational and educational contexts of higher education.

0.3. Reading the Study:

The focus and purpose of Sections One and Two: Section One explains and justifies the structure and focus of Section Two. Themes and arguments introduced within Section One reflect, inform and give rise to the structure for discussion of empirical data, in Section Two. These themes and arguments are fundamental to understanding

what student feedback means to students and lecturers, and provide the means to both interrogate and conceptualise their perceptions and experiences.

The thematic and argued perspectives set out in Section One evolved, over the course of the research, in conjunction with the collection, analysis and interpretation of empirical data. Section One reaches a set of conclusions that I use as both structural and argumentative framework for Section Two. Section One is thus vital to, and reflected in the discussion and conclusions I reach in Section Two. In reverse, both the discussion and conclusions found in Section Two justify and explain the perspective I present in Section One.

The study is organised so that it can be read in linear sequence. However Sections One and Two complement each other and there is considerable interplay and connection between the two. This reflects the way in which the study evolved.

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER ONE

Meaning and Representation

Introduction

This chapter uses an illustration to demonstrate how I conceptualise ‘meaning’: a layered and dynamic process of sense making that is rooted in, patterned by, and a continual question of personal, political and philosophical debates and influences. It raises the problems that arise when attempting to represent ‘meaning’ in textual, linear format.

First, I introduce the concept ‘meaning’ as both aim of, and problem for, qualitative research. Second, I outline other themes raised within my illustration of ‘meaning’. Third I juxtapose [1] extracts from a work of fiction, [2] my own explanation of the construction and meaning of the work of fiction and [3] extracts from theoretical works on qualitative research. These are used as provocation for discursive illustration, in parts four and five of this chapter, of some of the problems of representing ‘meaning’ in text, and the personal, political and philosophical debates associated with the question of what ‘meaning’ is.

1.1. Meaning

Meaning: The concept ‘meaning’ raises a set of complex questions and problems for qualitative research. Within qualitative research, the aim is to identify, articulate and represent the ‘meaning’ of human perception and experience such that it is communicated to the reader in fair, full and comprehensible ways. Questions of what ‘meaning’ is, how ‘meaning’ might be captured and communicated, and the extent to which these intentions and outcomes are justified, are fundamental issues that all research, and this study, must address.

Deliberations and interpretations: Identification, articulation and representation are themselves processes that involve philosophical, political and personal debates. The respective decisions in respect of these debates inform the character of research undertaken. Yet the dilemmas find no conclusive, universal resolution. Thus the products of qualitative research are contestable, *pace* Husserl, on the grounds that the research outcomes merely reflect the subjective deliberations and interpretations constructed and employed by the researcher. Nevertheless this also means that the researcher is implicated in, and is thus accountable for, his or her own approach to identification, articulation and representation.

Meaning in respect of the stages of research: The concept ‘meaning’ is a problem and question relevant to all stages in qualitative research. Furthermore, from the perspective of those stages, ‘meaning’ also implies different sorts of questions.

Initially the researcher has to arrive at an understanding of the concept ‘meaning’ in respect of *what is important and relevant to the participants* who contribute perspectives on their perceptions and experiences. The researcher has to do this at the same time as addressing the question of *what is important and relevant to the research question*. Within this, the researcher also has stake in, influence over, and powers to control the identification, articulation and representation of ‘meaning’. Thus the products of research *will contain and express the researcher’s own personal interests, values and interpretative resources*. The researcher has to render the processes of identifying, articulating and representing ‘meaning’ transparent to the reader; meaning *is the product of an explicit research process*; it is *expressed as and supported by an internally coherent, reasoned and justified argument*. Next, the research report has to communicate an argument such that this is *meaningful* to the reader. Finally, the meaning that the reader makes of the research is *the outcome of his or her own deliberations on and interpretations of what is communicated as argument*.

At all these stages in the research process, and from within each perspective, research is an act of making sense of what is identified, articulated, and represented as ‘meaning’. Research and ‘meaning’ are essentially interpretative and ongoing processes. At all stages, participants, the researcher and the reader are implicated in the active construction of ‘meaning’.

Research tools and the communication of ‘meaning’: The researcher is equipped with relatively few tools, and operates within a set of tight constraints when communicating a meaningful argument concerning ‘meaning’ in written form. The qualitative research process starts with wide-ranging and rich, personal and inter-subjective experiences. Throughout this the researcher operates as human being equipped with full interpretative and communicative resources. Yet the outcomes of these experiences have to be collected, organised and preserved as documentable ‘data’. Furthermore, the ‘meanings’ identified have to be articulated and represented (within the PhD thesis) solely in textual (words and pictures) form. These restrictions, on the processes of identifying, articulating and representing ‘meaning’, are questions and problems of significance many forms of research. For example,

just as performance measures do not and cannot meaningfully capture important dimensions, pluralities or dynamic, contextual aspects of program quality, the representational form of performance measurement systems can capture but a small fraction of what is important about a human experience like participation in a social program. On a canvas of this experience, performance measures are small dots of paint - probably distributed randomly and evenly and probably mostly gray. Still missing is the overall story of the canvas; its colours and hues; its textures and nuances; its emotional and compelling tones; its challenging and evocative shapes; ... the moral-ethical strands of human experience (Greene 1999:168-9).

1.2. Themes contained within parts 1.3-1.5

Meaning and student feedback methods: Many of the issues raised within this chapter are also pertinent to later discussions of the ‘meaning’ of student feedback. Continually and throughout the study I encounter and grapple with students’ and lecturers’ experiences and perceptions of a dominant method of student feedback: the student evaluation questionnaire. Their perceptions and experiences of this method indicate, in general, that just as ‘performance measurement systems do not adequately *capture or represent essential facets* of program quality as human and lived experience’ (Greene 1999:169; emphasis in the original), the student evaluation questionnaire requires students and lecturers to evaluate and communicate their views on participating in ‘teaching-learning’ using inadequate ‘small dots of gray paint’.

Words and meaning: The following extract indicates how ‘words’ become meaningful through their use within, and in relation to, a given context. I characterise words as essentially slippery and ambiguous, and perhaps abstract, when considered out of context. This goes some way to illustrate the problems associated with the identification, articulation and representation of the layered and dynamic process of ‘meaning’ when restricted to written text.

Meaning and spaces [1]. Deconstruction: Stronach (1999:185) describes deconstruction as a means of creating spaces for exploration. By challenging an

argument with an opposing view, the process generates questions; it investigates itself in a spiral of its own logic:

each reflexive fold of this text ... opens up a narrative space in which the relationship between the asserting discourse and demurring deconstruction is brought to the surface as arguable. ... As a result the reader ends up with more and less than two stories to play with rather than one.

The process is 'not a choice between stories or an extreme relativism, let alone a nihilism. It is not a proliferation of stories. It is their imbrication; the *trace* between them that constitutes a heuristic focus' (p.185). The purpose of this process is revealed as a moral question: 'what was epistemological is relocated in the end as an expression of value' (p.186). The process also has educational rationale:

Because the [opposing idea] also accuses itself of its own accusations ... then its relationship is not hegemonic so much as disruptive and reflexive. The critique begins to relate to itself deconstructively in order to refuse itself as a 'totalising account' (p.185).

Part three is an attempt to generate 'spaces'. It raises questions relating to the claims made by the theorists of qualitative research. These questions are followed up within parts four and five of this chapter. This attempt at space-making also reflects some of the processes I engaged in to explore the meaning of student feedback. Detail of these is contained in Chapter Two of Section One in the study.

Meaning and spaces [2]. Contradiction: Part three uses extracts from a work of fiction; the message of this fictional text is conveyed in its structure, is embodied in the figure of the protagonist, and is articulated through his assertions. The structure, protagonist and assertions centre on a logical contradiction; the message is revealed through exploration of the further logical implications of that contradiction.

Owing to their origin in a work of fiction, and also in respect of the particular message of that novel, the extracts also stand in tension with, if not contradict, some of the assertions contained in theoretical texts that claim qualitative research is ‘someone else’s story’ ‘told by us’ (Van Maanen 1988).

In part three of this chapter I attempt exploration of these tensions, and pursue the logical implications of the ‘contradictions’ identified in the original and produced *through* exploration and questioning. This process also reflects some of the methods I used to explore the ‘meaning’ of student feedback. Detail of these is contained in Chapter Two of Section One in the study.

Meaning and spaces [3]. Demonstration of its own process: Research is a process of coming to understand, of learning. The postgraduate student is also engaged in the task of learning about research. The PhD represents a process and outcome of learning, in respect of both the research topic and the research processes experienced.

The following illustration emphasises the idea of ‘process’. In the case of this study, the research aim of making sense (meaning) has been enabled by the exploration and questioning of contradictions and ‘spaces’. In this chapter ‘space’ and contradiction are used in an overt way to simultaneously realise and convey the process of exploration and questioning.

In this illustration I suggest (through demonstration) that the same exploratory and questioning process can be interpreted as means to develop and gain understanding; sense-making is also a process of coming to understand, or *learning*. Again, the learning process is contingent on exploration and questioning.

Exploration and questioning involve interactions with others and personal reflections, risks and uncertainties, fluidity, activity, entanglement and disentanglement, confusion and hesitant resolution. These elements are produced by, and are used to structure, represent and progress the process of coming to understand (learning) and making sense (meaning). I have therefore also attempted to demonstrate these elements within the illustration.

Biographically contextualised meaning: The researcher is implicated in the identification, articulation and representation of ‘meaning’. It is often asserted that qualitative research reports should contain explicit explanation of the biographical context in which the research is situated; an account of the researcher’s personal

motivations and interests is intended to render the researcher accountable for the research.

Throughout Section One I refer to the personal and research biography of this study. In this chapter, however, I contest the notion that it is possible to articulate and make explicit the strands, layers and origins of ‘biographical context’ in any way that is adequately concrete, comprehensive and fully communicative of personal, biographical ‘meaning’. I contest this by playing with various attempts to identify and express the inspiration for the research, and the connections between the research biography and my own personal biography.

Research outcomes might be better understood when contextualised through knowledge of the researcher’s biography, interests, values and motivations. Yet this should not imply the view that once this (inadequately but explicitly stated) influence of the researcher is ‘subtracted’, the ‘truth value’ of the research outcomes might be identified. ‘Meaning’ is not an objectifiable phenomenon: it is layered and dynamic, it is located in interactional relation between knower and known. Relational perspectives on ‘meaning’ also imply that the reader is accountable for the interpretations he or she makes of the research report.

Accountability and biographically contextualised meaning: I also raise the issue of biographical contextualisation because I find this questionable as means of rendering research accountable.

The assertion that research is justified against the personal biography of the researcher is rooted in relativism: “anything goes so long as we know from whence it has come”. This is an inadequate interpretation of ‘accountability’.

Internal methodological accountability is rendered when methods are made explicit, are explained in terms of their suitability for the purpose of the research, and are judged relative to methodological standards. *External* methodological accountability might be obtained when the epistemological paradigm implicit to the methods is explained and justified in terms of its fit with the object of study.

Yet questions of research accountability are also raised by the suitability and utility of the research for the intended purposes and audience for the research. Thus, accountability becomes a question of whether the research purposes, or needs and interests of the audience are justifiable; this question raises the issue of values. Accountability in research is a question that extends beyond the biography of the researcher to encompass contest and judgements concerning values.

1.3. 'Twice two is four is no longer life, gentlemen'¹

The researcher follows a path of discovery, using as a model qualitative works that have achieved the status of classics in the field. Enchanted perhaps by the myth of the Lone Ethnographer, the scholar hopes to produce a work that has the characteristics of a study done by one of the giants of the past (Denzin and Lincoln 1998:xii-xiii; my emphases).

Advantage? What is advantage? Besides, can you undertake to define exactly where a man's advantage lies? ... You laugh; laugh, then, gentlemen, but answer me this: can a man's interests be correctly calculated? Are there not some which not only have not been classified, but are incapable of classification? After all, gentlemen, as far as I know you deduce the whole range of human satisfactions as averages from statistical figures and scientific-economic formulas. ... But there is one very puzzling thing: how does it come about that all the statisticians and experts and lovers of humanity, when they enumerate the good things of life, always omit one particular one? They don't even take it into account as they ought, and the whole calculation depends on it. ... As a matter of fact, though, if the formula for all our desires and whims is some day discovered - I mean what they depend on, what laws they result from, how they are disseminated, what sort of good they aspire to in a particular instance, and so on - a real mathematical formula that is, then it is possible that a man will at once cease to want anything, indeed I suppose

¹ Notes from Underground, Fyodor Dostoyevsky; trns. Coulson, J (1972) London: Penguin (p.40)

it is possible that he will cease to exist. Well, what's the point of wishing by numbers? ... what is man without desires, without a will, without volition, but a sprig on the cylinder of a barrel-organ?²

Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process.

They go by a variety of different labels, including theory, method, and analysis and ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the ... researcher [who] approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways (Denzin and Lincoln 1998:23; emphases in the original).

For Dostoevsky, 'The Crystal Palace' symbolised the rise, power and danger of a 'new' European faith in economic materialism, scientific determinism, and rational egoism.

'The Crystal Palace' represented the belief that 'the laws of nature' were possible to identify, and that only this, scientific and technological advancement, would facilitate cultural, social and economic progress (R. Pearce 1993). Notes from Underground is both illustration of the *logical* implications of this belief and simultaneously exposition of a counter-argument. The counter-argument is structured by, and contingent on the reasoning and logic of the argument that it seeks to oppose. The counter-argument is also represented, presented and articulated through the figure of the 'underground man'.

Dostoevsky held that the process of 'being', and man's spirit, agency and motivation derive from, and are contingent on, 'free will'; this is the one thing the 'whole

² op cit. (pp. 29-34).

calculation depends on'. 'Free will' is anchored in, contained by and expressed as a consciousness of consciousness. This essential (self) consciousness cannot be subjected to prediction and control; and yet merely *the idea* that it might be defined, and constructed, as a scientifically and rationally explained formula signals its loss. The logic of the 'Crystal Palace' is based on a contradiction: it denies and negates free will, self-consciousness, human 'spirit' and human 'being'.

The idea is to create historically situated tales that include both highly focused portraits of what identifiable people in particular places at certain times are doing and a reasoned interpretation for why such conduct is common or not (Van Maanen 1998:xi-xii; my emphases).

The 'underground man' is a projection of The Crystal Palace extended on its own terms to the extremes of its own rationality. The 'underground man' is both embodiment and exegesis of a *necessarily* self-perpetuating cycle of self-refutation, self-negation and self-destruction. The 'underground man' is a contradiction: Dostoevsky's ontology of self-consciousness insists on 'the underground man' and yet renders him impossible.

And all out of boredom, gentlemen, all out of boredom; I am crushed with tedium. After all, the direct, immediate, legitimate fruit of heightened consciousness is inertia, that is, the deliberate refusal to do anything. ... After all, in order to act, one must be absolutely sure of oneself, no doubts must remain anywhere. But how am I, for example to be sure of myself? Where are the primary causes on which I can take my stand, where are my foundations? Where am I to take them from? I practise thinking, and consequently each of

my primary causes pulls along another, even more primary, in its wake, and so on ad infinitum. Perhaps this, once again is a law of nature. And what, finally is the result? The same thing over again.³

Qualitative work produces narratives - nonfiction division - that link events to events in storied or dramatic form with beginnings, middles and, ends. Story elements are explicitly connected, thus emplotting a research report with an apparent causal structure that itself is made theoretically plausible through argument and analogy (Van Maanen, 1998:xi, my emphasis).

The 'underground man' argues that when all human life is mapped and explained, there will be no point in thinking or doing anything, indeed it will be impossible to think or act on one's own will at all. 'Being' demands the freedom of will, the freedom to 'agree that two and two make four is an excellent thing; but to give everything its due, two and two make five is also a very fine thing'⁴

Whilst the 'underground man' is a negative symbol and tool of both thesis *and antithesis*, he also has an *alter ego*. Yet this other, the rational 'man of science and action' exists only as deceit. He is sustained only by a self-referenced logic; he balks with satisfaction when obstructed by the laws of nature he has himself conjured⁵. Thus the rational 'man of science and action' - the 'natural man' - also opposes his own nature by refusing his own (self) consciousness; he too is a self-negation: 'born dead'.⁶

³ op. cit. (p.26-27)

⁴ op. cit. (p.41)

⁵ cf. Chapter 3, op. cit.

⁶ op. cit. (p. 123)

Last of all, gentlemen: it is best to do nothing! The best thing is conscious inertial! So long live the underground! Although I have said that I am green with envy of the natural man, I wouldn't like to be him in the circumstances in which I see him (even though I shall not cease to envy him, all the same). No, no, the underground is better, in any case. ... Ach! The fact is I'm lying even now! I'm lying because I know, as sure as two and two make four, that it isn't the underground that is better, but something different, entirely different, which I am eager for but shall never find. Devil take the underground!⁷

For both 'the underground man' and the 'natural man' there *is* no freedom and thus no being. The Crystal Palace places constraints on meaningful existence; it is devoid of spirit, personality and individuality because it invalidates, nullifies and abrogates free-will. The 'underground man' languishes in his basement because there is, by force of logic, no point to his existence. With 'heightened awareness', not only of the presence of consciousness but also its simultaneous denial, he *suffers* from consciousness; consciousness is a *disease*. Yet he languishes delightedly: his awareness of the denial of consciousness is also a 'sublime pleasure': his awareness is a paradoxical recognition of the affirmation of consciousness through its negation. Consciousness provides (self) justification for (his existence in) the underground.

The sore point, is that both generic and fictional 'underground man' have no reason or purpose at all: they are merely the obverse of a deceit. The end point is that (T)he (U)nderground (M)an cannot exist, he can only inscribe himself as a (self-proclaimed) work of fiction. The paradoxical point is that he writes because he possesses *self-*

⁷ op. cit. (p.43)

consciousness, and thus aware of the inevitability of the fiction of his own (F)ictitious purpose.

It would be better if I believed even a small part of everything I have written here. I swear gentlemen, I don't believe a word, not one single word, of all I have scribbled down! That is, I do perhaps believe it, but at the same time, I don't know why, I feel or I suspect that I'm lying like a trooper.

'Then why have you written all this?' you ask me.⁸

The end result is its effect on the reader who, ideally is both enlightened by the narrative and persuaded by the explanation the writer offered (Van Maanen 1998:xii).

I, however, am writing for myself alone, and let me declare once and for all that if I write as if I were addressing an audience, it is only for show and because it makes it easier for me to write. It is a form, nothing else; I shall never have any readers.⁹

Behind all of these phases of interpretative work stands the biographically situated researcher. This individual enters the research process from inside an interpretative community that incorporates its own historical research traditions into a distinct point of view (Denzin and Lincoln 1998:23).

⁸ op. cit. (p.44)

⁹ op. cit. (p.45)

I may remark by the way, that Heine states that trustworthy autobiographies are almost an impossibility, and that a man will probably never tell the truth about himself.¹⁰

The aim of most qualitative studies is to produce a more or less coherent representation, carried by word and story, of an authorially claimed reality and of certain truths or meanings it may contain for those within its reach (Van Maanen 1998:xi).

But you can't imagine that I'm going to print all this and give it to you to read, can you? And here is the problem that puzzles me: why in fact, do I address you as 'gentlemen' and speak to you just as if I was genuinely speaking to readers? Confessions of the kind I intend to begin setting forth do not get printed or offered to others to read. At least I don't possess enough strength of mind for that, and I don't consider it necessary to possess it. But you see a fancy has come into my head, and cost what it may I want to translate it into reality.¹¹

The 'underground man' only exists if possessed of consciousness, only possesses consciousness if he is outside The Crystal Palace, yet is only conscious of these needs by force of that rational logic, that embraces him at the moment of self-consciousness of being (bound within its grip). He must achieve clarity yet negate any such meaningful art or purpose, and progressively contradict himself (through an un-ending process) into inertia .

¹⁰ op. cit. (p.45)

Exactly; but on paper it will be somehow more impressive. There is something awe-inspiring about it, one sits more severely in judgement on oneself, one's style is enhanced.¹²

¹¹ op. cit. (p.45)

¹² op. cit. (p. 46)

1.4. The Eleventh of August, 1999. Morning to Night

What does he mean, 'Exactly'? The UGM is never exact, that's the whole point. And he would never have agreed I was ever correct either, that's another whole point. In any case, his is hardly an enlightening and persuading account. The UGM is more of a confusion of contradictions if you ask me. Richard Pearce called him a 'an inveterate dodger of positive definitions'. A 'paradoxicalist'. Good description, a new word for the social science lexicons; we may now use these to fuel our treatises.

Although the social scientists up there didn't really relate to UGM's concerns with being pinned down. They appeared to be missing the point. Maybe UGM would have enjoyed that, to see them missing the point, that is. Missing him and his point.

But it does make you think, doesn't it - all the chipping in from different perspectives, between different perspectives? Well it made me think. Nearly did me in too. It's all too slippery; maybe I 'don't possess enough strength of mind for that'. Trying to pin it all Down, without pinning It all down. Put paradoxically.

But then again, it matters. And so getting to the present business, and to the point. Which point? There are lots. I made a list of 17 sets of questions, each containing at least 8 more, whilst reading over all the jumping about up there. Hmm.

Before I start though, I would like to note that '*Elegant Window Systems: Barrow in Furness*' have just arrived to insert double glazing next door.

Makes it quite hard to think just now. All the banging and builders.

Anyhow, to kick off: Lone Ethnographic heroes; they left us classics that chart our course. A warrant for present interests? Beefing up the conclusions? Name dropping? Blind faith?

Although, Dostoevsky is a *Classic*, don't you think? He wrote some mighty books, weighty tomes; I read them in- Hum, 1993.

Lots of thoughts were a-leaping about then too. Figuring out the links between the structure of novel and text and the relevance of this to intended meaning. It's an essential part *of* the meaning actually. As I wrote then (well yesterday actually):

The 'underground man' is an embodied argument, formed in the collision of two contradictory world views. The 'underground man' articulates and posits both thesis and antithesis. To infer the anti-human nature of rationality, the 'reality' of consciousness has to be posited; yet consciousness has to be framed in terms of the 'reality' of a rational world. The highly sensitive underground man who is possessed of a high degree of self-consciousness is a technique; he is used to express and represent the negative implications of one ontological belief at the same time as he is used to propose and demonstrate an alternative ontological belief. He is, but is a man that can never exist.

The message, although asserting the negative force of the negative dialectic, is ultimately positive. Consciousness does exist; it is at work in the figure of the ‘underground man’, driving him will-fully, purpose-fully, meaning-fully, individually and self-reflexively onwards through the processes of his own argument.

Spaces, leaping and layers. My thinking in 1993: links and connections; they were springing out of Russian texts and fully out of place in seminars about Nietzschean philosophy or the history of East Germany. Or at least some people thought they were out of place.

‘Giants of the past’: The UGM isn’t much of a role model: ‘I am an ill man, a malicious man, an unattractive man’ (the opening lines, depending how you translate them). Nor is old Dostoevsky come to that. It says here in the front of NfU:

‘Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, [there are various transliterations of his name, by the way], was born in Moscow in 1821, the second of a physician’s seven, [seven!], children. His mother died in 1837 and his father was murdered a little over two years later. ... In 1849 he was arrested and sentenced to death, [for being associated with revolutionaries, apparently], he was reprieved at the last moment but sentenced to penal servitude, and until 1854 he lived in a convict prison at Omsk, Siberia. ... In 1863 he went abroad where he strengthened his anti-European

outlook, ... and gave way to his passion for gambling. During the years that followed he fell deeply into debt.

Not such a mythical hero, then.

Don't be judgmental. Show some empathy.

Poor Bloke!

No, that's sympathy, try seeing it from his perspective.

He had to earn a crust, and the conditions he faced weren't *all* of his own volition.

OK.

Many of the novels were vaguely autobiographical. Wonder if he lied, or at least conjured evidence, omitted the not-so-interesting moments? Just now and then? It's important to know this, because if all texts are contextualised by - that is, rooted in - the author's biography, then Dostoevsky must have also been a murderer, idiot, and devil? He was certainly a gambler, as we've just learnt, and had some brothers, I presume. The author's biography, like some sort of array of facts external to the words. The meaning of words is not self-evident and thus we need info. about the context for those words.

But that's stupid. It's not like you need York Notes to start reading a novel: the meaning derives from the process of playing around with its links, references, parallels, layers. And contradictions. So, that's where the meaning is.

Well, actually, it's not just THERE. And it's not just in ME either. Whether or not the stuff is fact, fiction or based on lies, its meaning lies in the connections between the text and me; connections between ideas and references there and ideas and experiences I've already had (although I could be deceiving myself). So my work is to make the meaning; to draw together strands in the web of the text and tie them up in me. Oh, and to relate this to other people, necessarily.

But still, D makes a jolly good *authority* figure, being a *Penguin* Classic and all. Which is good, because just as he was thought provoking then, the UGM is relevant now. Lots of tie-ins with student feedback researchers keen to establish and employ causal relations between student feedback results and students' dispositions to teaching etc.

You know once I'd remembered the UGM and spotted these connections, my thoughts just spiralled off on their own collision courses and didn't hang around or return to the same point. So there's an example of why it's difficult to pin point what's informed my experiences and interpretations in this research, actually. What's participated in it. Provoked me to question, find out more, to talk with others. What's helped when making sense of it all. John Heron wrote in 1996.... no that comes later. Must stick to the plan.

Role Models: But I don't *have* 'idols' to emulate. More to the point, both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky would despise me for having any. Dostoevsky would get me to church (ever read the end of *Crime and Punishment*? - the Bible Under the Pillow moment?), and Nietzsche out of it; both in order that I don't follow others but become myself. A reflection of their respective arch suspicions of dogma: the doctrines that trap free consciousness, thought and action.

Hmm. We, or I rather, appear to have swayed from the point. So ...

Biographical context for the research: It all started when I was sitting in a Students' Union, employed as a researcher, researching 'The Student Experience' -

- Just to interject a second, I have to say that 'satisfaction forms' represent an extremely attenuated concept of experience, the student, and the student experience. And satisfaction for that matter. I should say students' experience, too because it all gets added up and flattened out and *eclipses* the individual student in the end.

Eclipses - yes it just happened here. Although I have to say that the grey cloud sweeping past - just at the crux point - had greater effect than the moon. Too far north of Cornwall.

Still, the birds stopped cheeping.

And the Boys from Barrow stopped banging.

..... So, there I was, in a Students' Union, researching Student Representation and Feedback systems in the hope of getting it all to work better; interviewing Deans and students about their respective practices and involvement.

The departments all had different systems actually: the Historians preferred a 'School of Scholars' approach to inquiry, Media students had group discussions, Politics students chose representatives using different electoral systems, (no, language students did not do it all in French but funny isn't it) and the Chemists obtained all the interesting information in the chemistry labs, apparently just through staff and students hanging around and about with each other.

However the Chemists - actually they all said - that debate, discussion, chatting etc. was problematic because it was a bit unrepresentative. Too slap-dash. Couldn't be documented. Or pinned down in quantities, assessed for reliability and produced as evidence. So, the Chemists also had forms, and so did all the others (the ecology department had a series of statistical charts that showed year on year change, tee hee). And in the Sociology dept. - Oh dear, this is bizarre. It's quite funny, all these connections. Well no actually it made me very angry. Here's the tale:

SOCIOLOGY

1. One self-acknowledged Red (with a capital M) lecturer tries to get everything going with what he calls 'consciousness-raising', revolutionary-type exercises.

2. The lecturer has great success, lots of students joined in. However, they are all labelled trouble-makers. The lecturer is reprimanded - for being too ideological. Or maybe for having the wrong ideology. In any case he is made to stop it all.

3. So then representation is re-organised, processes anonymised - as if

admitting the students have a right to be anxious about being labelled. Neat and tidy forms are produced, and the activity is brought into Order.

4. All quiet. The departmental secretary is now able to analyse the results - at the slight touch of a button, saves time, saves thought - and to put colour pie-charts on the wall, for everyone to see. This is, apparently, visible demonstration of democratic representation and care.

5. Nothing comes of this incident. Not much change happens after, either.

So much for student empowerment. But of course it's not just a question of megaphones versus pie-charts, goodies and baddies. Swinging between two poles, getting nowhere fast.

I could call it repressive tolerance. Now. Been reading a bit of Marcuse. Not that I'm happier with original situation mind, just because I have a few labels or a keener perspective. Not that the ability to recognise and identify things, to write a depiction that is clarified by present insight - or is my insight clarified through this description? - make it *automatically* better. You have to *do* something about it. But not now. More later. Where was I?

..... Oh yes. So, the idea for this research started, when I realised that representation and feedback was not, 'not working' because the Students' Union didn't put up enough posters about elections and training. Cumbersome bureaucracy *or* speedy technology - neither appeared to excite interest on the part of either students or lecturers. And I didn't like my job much either -

- Hello? I must have written this next bit earlier on. I just found it whilst I was scrolling down the screen under the toolbar here which, incidentally, tells me it is time for lunch soon.

..... *And it all started when I was fiddling around editing the preface to this study, for the 100th time, in a moment of angst concerning the question, 'Just how is this thesis going to fit together, parts and whole, threads and ribbons and all that*

I want to say?'. You see I had to begin somewhere, but where? So I fiddled with the editing a little longer.

In between (angst, fiddling, memories, flicking through old books) I thought again about what the student and lecturer on the preface actually meant.

Might as well continue from here then.

You think for a while about what they're saying. Then what they mean in relation to each other. Lots of things, I imagine. I don't mind *what* you think - well I do actually - but differences might be well argued out in debate. Maybe we'd come up with some ideas that I haven't thought of yet as well.

I'm off for lunch now, so you have a few moments.

Hi. Thought about it?

I just asked myself a question: why does the lecturer *want* to objectify and quantify something that he obviously doesn't think *can be* set down in stone and multiplied? Probably *has* to, though. Those are the rules of the game. Even if he did say later on that he'd like to put a secret microphone in the bar, to learn what they *really* think. 'Really' think. Bit paranoid.

On the other hand, is he implying that the students do have 'real' and concrete thoughts. Don't ever change their minds? Maybe they are in two minds. Maybe they have contrasting views that are both REAL and held simultaneously. 'Really' think. Hmmm. Problematic. Well he may be right - the old one about representing oneself appropriately in front of the person who is (or might be) listening.

Any answers?

..... You see it all started *actually* when I thought about the self-contradictions involved in what that lecturer was saying.

He spoke with a tone of self-irony when he said: I just go on handing these out every year at the end of the course, and getting them back and being very pleased, although it doesn't show up in the text version, so its not evident. Evidenced.

The consciousness of ones own conscious incompetence. ...

A knowing 'paradoxicalist'! Got it in!!

I know that he finds the whole exercise self-defeating because he is a friend of mine, so we chat about things in the pub. And the interview does fit with the personal experience, when I think about it. Trust me. Well some of it fits, and he would reject my ideas, my interpretations. And that's his right. And I should take care really.

Off for a bike ride. Tired confused head.

**

So, some ideas have fallen into place. Well they've fallen into notes (that are now piles on my floor). Notes to myself, thoughts and a rush to jot them so I didn't lose the moment. Putting some order to what is in my head. Nietzsche did that too. Part of the problem with his published books is that some writings should have remained private. He even said so. The private notes were conversations with himself that just helped him straighten out his thoughts. Yet his sister gathered up the notes he wrote - to himself - and Published them. From notes to Notes. Making them Official.

Nevertheless I still wouldn't want him as a role model. Whilst his books get you thinking, there are a tad few too many misogynist, xenophobic bits. A sign of the times? Seeing it in context? No, can't forgive that. Time's moved on in my opinion - an opinion I'd like you to share.

Role models: Now, there are certain friends who have inspired me. One is a Trade Unionist, another a Politician. But don't assume that I'm unconsciously influenced by their Views, their ideologies. And neither would agree with the other anyhow, although if they did meet they'd not come to blows about it, let me assure you. Just a heated debate, very grown up. Or motivated by the opportunity to tidy up their views, maybe adjust them a little. Except for one is German and the other from Northern Ireland. I could translate, I suppose. Unless they spoke in metaphors, words that contain many potential ideas all on their own. Out of context, maybe some of the associations are not translatable so neatly, not applicable across-cultures.

..... Another thing, a German word in an English text looks like terminology. A thing. A one-meaning word, irrefutable, unambiguous. Take *verstehen* for example. Or more accurately, if it is going to be Terminology '*das Verstehen*'. However, *verstehen* is a verb, a process, a 'doing word', not a thing. This could matter, Terminology-wise. *Das Verstehen* is the act of doing something. What?

Turning to my Lexicons: 'to perceive the meaning of, the explanation of, the nature of, the significance of'; 'to express uncertainty or surprise or indignation'; 'To imply warning or a threat'. Hmmm. Confusing. Well there is long-standing dispute about it, apparently.

Let's see.

Stehen: 'to stand'; 'to be situated'. *Stehen auf*: 'to like something'. *Aufstehen!*: 'stand up' ("!" makes the imperative. It's not 'in' the word). If you do it to yourself - reflexively - *sich aufstehen*, then you are getting out of bed. *Sich verstehen*: 'to agree implicitly', 'to get on with someone else'. And 'ver' usually implies something wrong, an error; *drucken*: 'to print'; *verdrucken*: 'to misprint'.

Which is curious. The joke interpretation - *verstehen*: 'to have wrong posture or stance'. It's not 'to misunderstand' either. *Sich verstehen auf*: 'to understand intellectually'; 'to have expertise'. 'Ent' usually renders opposition: *zaubern*: 'to conjure up'; *entzaubern*: 'to shatter illusions'; 'take all the magic out'. The poor old duck - *Die Ente*: the 'opposite-thing'. You'd expect *entstehen* to mean 'to not stand', maybe 'to collapse'. But no. It can mean 'to cause to be'; 'to result from'. Now *sich entstehen*, here's something: 'to become', 'to come into being'.

Actually I've just found out that 'ver' adds 'penetrating' as an emphasis. So, 'to gain penetrating understanding of', or 'to gain clear insight into'. Or to stand, penetratingly, ha ha. A shifty verb, 'verstehen'. But there is no logic to it all. And applying logic just leaves you with more puzzles to solve. Contradictions even.

Maybe all this lends insight. Language isn't a mathematical formula, you see.

Or maybe not; just playing around. Better get on.

Words and representation: It is possible to create an event or thing (that you can't see) by making it manifest in words. *Cause* it to be. It can come in for Real criticism then. But your fabrication may make real, with rational explanation of causal determinants, what may not be so clear, or predictable. Like a court of law. Was there a motive? You might also capture meaning only to imprison it, and obscure qualities of meaning that are significant precisely because of their intangible, ephemeral nature.

It is also possible to describe an actual event on the basis of what has actually been said; but that's complicated too. Like the students, people hold various and simultaneous interpretations of the same event; they understand and recount their own actions at variance bearing in mind their present context, their audience, their assessment of what is appropriate to tell.

Depending on how much control they have over the context for and process of the telling. Or can have. Whether there are rules. Whether they know the rules. Whether they are aware that there are rules. And potential sanctions. All of which matters greatly, but differently, depending on whether you are Goffman, Giddens or Wilf Carr.

Pfff.

Identifiable people in particular places at certain times: All in all I think the UGM is perfectly correct to try and avoid being pinned down, constantly deny his own assertions. He's like a metaphor for the process of meaning. The tormenting torment of responses and reactions, little layers and circles, external references, internal associations - a mixed up ball of wool, threads and knots of influences and connections. More from 1993 (yesterday):

The message, in Notes From Underground is presented, represented and organised through dialogic articulation to the reader, embodiment and structure. The message is developed and simultaneously achieved, inter-woven into a negative dialectic, where the 'underground man', as the central protagonist, links and constitutes the logical relation between two contra-distinct and mutually-invalidating discourses. (consciousness of loss of consciousness) / (self-negation through self-affirmation). The force of negative relation, constituted through the opposition of consciousness and rationality, is recast as consciousness turned inwards on itself, logic and rationality used against itself.

And now, dialectics:

Ahem.

No, off to lunch (I lied earlier).

Back now. Been having some thoughts. Lost a bit of faith in myself as well. Decided that being brave is a risky endeavour, and I don't think that I can write this.

It's a **P H D**.

The swan-song of my intellectual development since childhood, an entry ticket into the academic profession. And what am I doing? Churning out a mess it seems. If I scroll up a little -

- yep. Recanting, decanting, in that sort of self-indulgent way. Quite an annoying, self-referenced tone. Recanting the past through the present in an attempt to compose a reasoned argument, based on my sense of it all. But very far from ideal. Which Nietzsche might call a 'life-preserving error':

The four errors. - Man has been reared by his errors: first he never saw himself other than imperfectly, second he attributed to himself imaginary qualities, third he felt himself in a false order of rank with animal and nature, fourth he continually invented new tables of values and for a time took each of them to be eternal and unconditional, so that now this, now that human drive and state took first place and was, as a consequence of this evaluation, ennobled. If one deducts the effect of these four errors, one has also deducted away humanity, humaneness and 'human dignity'; Gay Science, 115.

And UGM would celebrate such Bad Judgement. He'd certainly agree with this bit, but deny so all the same:

Life no argument. - We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live - with the postulation of bodies, lines, surfaces, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content: without these articles of faith nobody could now endure to live! But that does not yet mean they are something proved and demonstrated. Life is no argument; among the conditions of life could be error; Gay Science, 121.

So that casts considerable doubt on my own better judgement:

(The wish to construct a plausible argument, to explain and justify my understanding in a comprehensible, honest, reasoned and sincere way.

To defend it in open equal debate -

the World 'as one big gigantic seminar', as Will Outhewaite says -

so that if accepted on those grounds it could be advanced as a right argument).

So much for Van Maanen and Habermas then. The question is, whose 'plausibility' and whose 'normative'? And anyway, PhD regulations and vivas don't exactly provide for 'ideal speech situations'. Ho hum.

Yes, it all appears to be a little beyond my grasp, reKanting experience. Ha ha.

?

..... Just been reading (a translation so not ideal, but again, a *Penguin Classic*).

Nietzsche took the extended logic of *his* insight to bizarre conclusions. Listen to how the 'Four Errors' ended up later:

What alone can our teaching be? - That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself* (the nonsensical idea here last rejected was propounded, as 'intelligible freedom', by Kant) ... *No one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been and will be. He is not the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is not the subject of an attempt to attain an 'ideal of man' or an 'ideal of happiness' or and 'ideal of morality' - it is absurd to *hand over* his nature to some purpose or other. Twilight of the Idols; The Four Great Errors.

Quite handily then, Nietzsche disentangles man from the idea of accounting for his own actions; there are no universal standards. Well, great. So it's OK to rustle up a good old monstrous war then - fun entertainment for the afternoon. It's merely a question of not succumbing to the inevitability of either self-destructive relativism or nihilist destruction:

what can I possibly say ... that there is nothing here but appearance and will-o-the-wisp and a flickering dance of spirits - that among all these dreamers I, too, the 'man of knowledge', dance my dance, that the man of knowledge is a means of

spinning out the earthly dance and to that extent one of the masters of ceremonies of existence; Gay Science, 54.

The *implication* of that way of thinking is that life is just one great party, that there is no point to the party, and no point in which you could ask someone to leave the party. Although the party wouldn't end! No Last Orders! No Final Judgement.

However, amoral dreams are not the answer to the 'futile' quest for universal laws. The absence of deterministic frame is not licence for 'anything goes'. Interpretations, assertions, actions, the interests represented and the imperatives signalled all draw on, articulate and are judged in terms of values. Values are available to contest, and should be. Whilst imperfect, we need the process of debate; we need to acknowledge and contest value judgements. More later.

Sitting: It's just that also, some things *are* self-evident. For example, I am sitting on a chair, at a table. But that *also*, the meaning of the table is not self-evident. It lies in the tales and experiences attached to it, etched on to it: from scratched-in goalposts for penny-football games played by my Dad and Uncle, to my brother's graffiti. 1940's vandals and 1980's evasion of homework.

Education: A moral football that often gets kicked during other peoples' games. But homework's moral strike is actually Ideology. Based on the formula:

$$\text{Values (power + interests)} = \text{Ideology.}$$

Ideology stitched-up as puffed-up morality equals the product of values and human contest. The Great Radio 4 Debate: 'Homework is the stitching on the educational fabric of the nation'. Except the debate does not rage. Very enraging. And the formula is a little more tricky than it looks. You can't always see the formula working. You can't always see the results. It's possible to assume or pretend that it doesn't matter either, that it's OK, normal. Like some magician's secret formula eh?

Libraries: Nevertheless if I *do* pursue the argument sufficiently and it is accepted, then, ta da! I'll get this study bound as a book to add to the tomes that fill up the gaps between different classification numbers in the library. Big relief. Life restored.

I wonder where they will put it?

The thing is, the study of (in this case 'higher') education has never led me to the education part of the library. They asked me at my interview for my current job, 'How did you find the transition from your undergraduate discipline to your new one?'. I felt pretty indignant. What an assumption to make, about border territories and territorialism on the one hand and on the other, the *idea* that there are cognate fields in which knowledge resides, never shaking hands with other concepts from foreign pastures (fields). And as if it's *possible* to leave a discipline behind. However, I said, 'Well, I appeared to find myself travelling to sociology, psychology, philosophy and politics, but the education section didn't actually have value for what I wanted to know at the time'. No part in my process, no feature of the self-evident activity. Great discipline, education, hiding away in the background, minding its own bookshelves whilst I minded my own questions. It measured 0 out of 10 as a discipline if measured in behaviourally referenced terms. Ha ha. Good way to escape being benchmarked. But there I was attending an interview in an educational research department.

Another point is that there are a few common ideas within all those disciplines: ontology, epistemology and methodology. Although in some parts of the library the writers of the books appear to have fused and conflated everything into method. I'll

show you a few examples later on. But in their own different ways, for different reasons and about different topics, all the tomes *do* represent particular formulations of knowledge and knowing.

Dostoevsky and Nietzsche were obsessed with the ontology question. In relation to the 'crisis of modernity'. Dostoevsky's ontology implied the 'being of meaning' - reconciliation with an original spirituality, expressed as a process that had value as a process. Consciousness of consciousness. How do you do that? Pretty phenomenal. Transcendental. Must have been on drugs.

In the end, Nietzsche argued for the 'meaning of being'; this constitutes reconciliation with a future spirituality and gives rise to the power to endure the 'unaccountable' and never-ending process of existence. But really, Nietzsche didn't believe in much at all. Neither metaphysics: God's dead, nor science, politicians and philosophers: just poor deluded Sophists or moralists who mistook the loss of God as justification for the creation of a new set of doctrines within which to imprison Real man. And as for relativists, well they needed to face up to the horrific logic of their own conclusions.

So, maybe both N & D arrive at the same conclusion in the end: the *value* of the *process*: meaning as a way 'to be' and as outcome of 'being'. But this conclusion is like a new doctrine. Which is an ironic paradox in Nietzsche's case.

To be fair, Nietzsche believed in self-contradiction as a discipline of thought. He said it in The Gay Science, (the one that the scientists and intellectuals misunderstood), in section 297:

Ability to contradict: Everyone now knows that the ability to endure contradiction is a high sign of culture. Some even know that the higher man wants and evokes contradiction so as to acquire a guidepost to his own acts of injustice hitherto unknown to him, But that the *ability* to contradict calls for a *good* conscience in enmity towards the customary, the traditional, the sanctified - that it is more than the other two and what is actually great, new, astonishing in our culture, the step of steps for the liberated spirit: who knows that?

A sniff of an educational idea, there. Learning as a process directed to a purpose, personal. Recognising and confronting the taken for granted and developing conscience. Recognising restrictions in order to burst out beyond them. Funny, because although the enmity, elitism and the 'putting up with it all' might be abhorrent, the rest might be something that Freire would like.

You'll object, Nietzsche has a very bad press, not surprisingly. But the reputation owes more to the various interpretations and the uses to which his work was put; all most contradictory. He ended up as The Complete Works: romanticism, scientism, modernism, post-modernism, expressionism, impressionism, nihilism, anti-nihilism, the anarchist's manifesto (bit of a paradox there) etc. All based on a pick and mix approach

to N's books. It's just that the fascists picked and mixed exclusively from the dodgy parts.

Did you know, Nietzsche claimed he was Polish so he could pour vitriol on the Germans, and he ended up despising Wagner? Out of spite, more than objection to the music, actually. And to express a preference, my favourite bits are Apollo and Dionysis. Form and content. Can't have one without the other: the light that gives shape to the energy that sustains the light, (have a read of Death in Venice, by Thomas Mann). The original hermeneutic relation.

Maybe.

The final - yes really - thing I want to say concerns one word in particular. Critical. Now, it is somewhat empowering, if annoying for all concerned, to gain the ability to scrutinise ideas, actions and assertions for their underlying assumptions. To cast a beady eye on imperatives that evoke and reproduce social norms and values; to consider who thinks they have the right to do so and by which means. To look at the consequences of the situation, or hazard the implications. And to do something about it. It's critical, critical. Being critical, or becoming critical maybe. Does it stop? Some people wish I would: You think too much. -

Oh, and there's a paradox I have to explain.

Now it all boils down to this. Here I am, about to launch into a critical examination, in full critical awareness that I gaze through lenses. Like a magic mirror middle-man that changes all that I see into how I want to see it. But equally, if I take the contact-lenses out, then I won't be able to gaze. I'd squint at fragments.

So inevitably, the conclusions I come to will be contingent on my own way of seeing, my own views. Self-confirming conclusions. Very handy.

I'm plagued by that 'self-confirming' demon. What I argue will be contingent on the way I have researched the question, established the question even, continue questioning. So if I come out at the end saying this or that about whatever, then the dualist might well reach for a pistol and accuse me of that which I accuse them:

Many students of qualitative methods develop [horror] for what they call, with spite, positivism. ... students learn to use the term as an abusive catch-all for anything they don't like about theories, approaches, and findings coming from outside the theory and research circles with which they identify and are comfortable (Van Maanen 1998:xiv).

Dichotomies. Gaps. 20 paces that have to be somehow side-stepped. Not danced around, in a 'every/nothing matters' way. But it is just so difficult. Because my little fingers type away, and my ink-pen isn't as powerful as that pistol. Maybe the answer is to forget the dual. Although the demon in me would like to get the dualist to see that she-he is shooting him-herself in the foot anyway. But the dualist has no lenses in,

doesn't see. Doesn't recognise their own tinted frames. Just blinks and turns their head away, back to their own interests. Hmm. Sad. Look at it from someone else's point of view:

by making a dogma of the sciences' belief in themselves, positivism assumes the prohibitive function of protecting scientific inquiry from epistemological self-reflection (Habermas 1978:67).

So I need a huge mirror. Full of reflections of people. Arguing the value of what might be lost from view, when viewed through particular lenses:

The replacement of epistemology by the philosophy of the science is visible in that the knowing subject is no longer the subject of reference. ... For an epistemology restricted to methodology, the subjects who proceed according to these rules lose their significance. Their deeds and destinies belong at best to the psychology of the empirical persons to whom the subjects of knowledge have been reduced (Hab. again).

A little sensitivity is definitely called for. Sensitivity and openness to alternatives. Exploration and understanding. Self-sensitivity. Sensitivity to what I might leave out.

The assessment of my conclusions will have to boil down to a value-judgement.

Whether the roots and implications of what I have to say *matter*. And whether what is

lost in the frame, *not* seen, *not* generated, *not* known, *not* understood and unlikely to be practised - *matters*. That's the only route out of my paradox.

Of course it will also depend on whether I obtain the ability to be coherent. It's difficult, this puzzle of just how to fit a synchronous cyclical process into a sequence. It's that *verstehen* word you know. Cunning. Definitely 'standing-penetratingly', in my opinion. You get one big whole epiphanous leap of clear insight, appreciation prompted by 58 bit-part questions that all command, 'No elision!' (don't leave me out). And it all has to be condensed, set down in a line of trying little elusive words. And in the process you get about 50 billion little other evanescent insights, all trying to lead you off course.

But I won't start now. All worn out.

The curtains are drawn across the new double-glazed windows. Fitted and sparkling, reflecting my table-lamp and some crisp bags blowing around in the street. Which is peaceful now. Think I

should go to bed.

After a glass of wine and emailing, that is. Hee hee.

1.5. The Twelfth of August 1999. Morning

I emailed all that to lots of people, to see what they thought.

No replies yet. Feeling a bit insecure about it, even if the writing did have a cathartic effect.

Or maybe that was the wine.

Incidentally, I just found 2 Post-It Notes™ I wrote last night to remind myself about some further points I wanted to add. Thought I'd finished? I'll be brief.

1. 'Words' are not indexical; you can't count up 50 uses of the same word as if each use implies the same meaning.
2. Words find meaning in their use; their ambiguity is useful; their use lends meaning. 'Meaning' is a *process*. Perception, praxis. Relational. Just its own little dynamic, spinning on what it touches, refracted by what gets in the way.

How to pin it down?

You mean, how to tie it up in words? It is all tied up in words. And me. Tied up in me.

Meaning that is.

Maybe I'm tied up in words too. They've certainly been (T)rying.

But -

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER TWO

Methods Used in the Study: Traces of a Process of Learning

Introduction

This chapter charts the stages in the processes I have undertaken throughout the study in order to conceptualise the meaning of student feedback. It examines the different sorts of data that I have identified and generated, analysed and interpreted. It examines the choices and insights gained and the consequential paths and processes I followed in seeking further information. It describes these developments in the research process as a pathway stimulated by, and reflective of, both the understandings that I gained and the unknowns that were suggested throughout exploration and questioning of the different sources and forms of data I used.

This approach to articulating the methods used in the study is an attempt to express, explain and justify the methodological perspective that underpins this study. My perspective is that research is a process of learning; this perspective has also *developed* as a consequence of this particular piece of research.

Rather than seek external legitimisation by reference to a single or traditional methodological or theoretical territory, I intend to emphasise how research is an open process that leads to greater understanding; the research outcomes are formulated,

expressed and justified as an argument that is internally coherent and yet available and open to contest. The study's conclusions are defensible to the extent that there is clarity about their connections and disconnections with alternative beliefs and perspectives, and there is coherent, sufficiently reasoned argument and substance to provide for counter-argument to these alternatives.

The message of this chapter is that what I have identified as the meaning of student feedback is contingent on the particular process, paths and forms of data that *I* have pursued, happened across and experienced. The choices, insights, actions and processes, that derived the 'meaning' of student feedback and led to greater understanding of that 'meaning', are contingent on me as the researcher; they involve my own personal and research biography, and are informed by and reflect my own values and interests. Yet the value of the study's conclusions is not restricted to or dependent upon the researcher. The outcomes of the research process are communicable to others, and only purposeful when communicated to others as an argument that is meaningful and reasoned.

The methodological perspective, that research outcomes are a product of learning, and that learning is a process of research is based on the idea that research involves self, exploration of what is known, and exploration and sensitivity to what is not known. When research is pursued through processes of self-critical reflection and is prompted by critical openness, research is a reflection of a 'critical sensitivity'.

First, I discuss the significance to research outcomes of the methodological paradigm and theoretical frameworks on which a piece of research is grounded; both the paradigm and framework inform and reflect a view what it is 'to know'. I outline my own methodological perspective within an explanation of what I mean by the terms 'extended epistemology', 'critical sensitivity' and 'constant critical analysis'. I discuss the significance to my own research of the efforts I have made to sustain a critical and reflexive openness when seeking greater understanding of student feedback.

Second, I examine the sources, roles and status of different sorts of data within the study: I describe the different literatures I have identified, and the different use I have made of them. I outline my rationale for, and approach to the generation of qualitative interview data. I discuss the questions I addressed when attempting analysis of the data and the various stages in the analysis process. I then conceptualise the outcomes of this work in terms of their implications for subsequent investigations of literatures and other data, for my own understanding of the meaning of student feedback, and for the development of my own 'critical sensitivity'.

Third I describe the biography of the research in terms of the significance to the research outcomes of my own personal experiences as insider-researcher in higher education. I conclude with a self-critical appraisal of the methods and paths I have pursued.

2.1. Orientations to the methodological principles of this research.

2.1.1 Method and Methodology

The methodological paradigm and theoretical frameworks on which a piece of research is grounded is significant to the outcomes of research. Kvale (1996a, 1996b) argues that the way a researcher *understands* what it is 'to know' governs their conceptualisation of *what there is to be known*, influences both what they *intend* to find out and the evidence they seek to demonstrate those findings, and thus determines *how* they set about the process of finding out.

Reason and Heron (1995) refer to the researcher's 'gaze' as a 'filter' through which the researcher's inquiry is focused, and in which it is based. The researcher is inextricably linked to the research outcomes; she is a knowing-subject implicit to, reflected within, and a constituent part of the results of each stage in the research process (Janesick 1998).

The generation of qualitative research data is an *inter-subjective, dialogical* and *co-constructed* process between researcher and the research participant/s (Heron 1996, Kvale 1996a, 1996b). Research is an essentially interpretative and reflexive activity that mirrors the ontological nature of 'being' (c.f. Crossley 1996, Holstein and Gubrium 1998); interpretation and communication are dependent on what is already known and shared as meaningful (Gadamer 1989, Heidegger 1962, Schutz 1972). Both the research processes and the nature of 'being' depend on linguistic communicative exchange to the

extent that the exchange of meaning draws on, and is patterned by, available social and contextual resources for meaning and by the constraints and dynamics that structure social contexts for interaction (Fairclough 1989, Garfinkel 1967, Geertz 1973, Giddens 1993, Halliday 1978, Potter and Wetherell 1987, Shotter 1989).

The implications of these views are twofold. First they posit an ethical question, in respect of *whose* 'truth' is reported (Johnson 1996, Altheide and Johnson 1997).

Second they posit an epistemological question concerning the validity and generalisability of such 'co-produced', subject-dependent 'truths'.

The nature of research processes and the role of the researcher are questions that demand explicit acknowledgement of a researcher's perspective on knowledge and the researcher's interests, objectives and means of approach. For example, Kvale recognises that his concept of the interview as 'conversation' necessitates that he recognise the wider consequences of that view:

the conversation encompasses ... not only the research interview as a specific professional methodological tool, but involves epistemologically a clarification of the nature of the knowledge constructed by methods as the research interview, and it is ontologically the basic form of human interaction in a human world as a conversational reality (Kvale 1996b: 7).

I illustrated my own perspective on research within Chapter One of this first section to the study. Some of the processes that led to the development of my perspective, and

that led to greater personal understanding and clarity about my beliefs and interests are detailed over the course of this present chapter. The descriptions of the methods I have used are explained and justified in terms of their influence on, and status within the process of research. The methods are also the outcome of personal deliberation and choice; explanation and justification of the relationship between methods and research outcomes must also therefore contain substantial reference to the basis of my thoughts and understandings at each stage and choice in the research.

2.1.2 ‘Critical’ Comparative Analysis

The study aims to conceptualise what student feedback means to students and lecturers and must thus attempt to ground itself in their own personal expressions of feeling and experience. The meaning of student feedback is built and conceptualised through analysis and interpretation of the themes, concepts and perspectives contained within the empirical data. The data I draw on extends beyond empirical interview data. The idea of a ‘continuous interplay between analysis and data collection’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998:158) is extended here to express an ongoing and complex interplay between the sources of data contained within an ‘extended epistemology’.

2.1.3 'Extended epistemology'

The idea of an 'extended epistemology' refers to knowledge as product and reflection of different ways of 'knowing' and 'coming to know'. Heron (1995,1996) argues that four forms of knowledge are implicated in what it is to 'know'. On his terms an 'extended epistemology' refers to experiential, propositional, perceptual, representational and practical ways of knowing and coming to know. These different sources become meaningful as knowledge through their interrelation and interplay in practice.

Within this study I use the idea of an 'extended epistemology' to conceptualise the different theoretical, propositional, experiential, personal and empirical sources of 'data' I have identified and used during the research process. These terms refer, respectively, to various sources of literatures, formal sociological and educational theory, the biography of the research, the influences of my own biography and personal values and interests, the interview data, and the emergent concept of student feedback itself.

2.1.4 Critical and reflexive openness

I have pursued methods compatible with my own (developing) methodological perspective. Yet I have made productive use of the principles of method and methodological paradigms that are used by others in their own research into student feedback, and that underpin different methods of student feedback. Many of these are distinct from my own; I have employed the distinction to question and gain insight into my own perspectives on research, and on my own research outcomes.

This approach is useful, in that it means to constrain and check my own conclusions. Yet, it is also a reflection of the subject of this study. The study involves a double hermeneutic: it is a research investigation of students' and lecturers' reflections on their experiences of and reactions to a research method. At the same time it is a piece of research that involves methodological choices, perspectives and experiences, and must reflect on, explain and justify itself in methodological terms. There is, necessarily, a set of complex relations, if not also substantial productive potential, in this situation.

2.1.5 'Critical Sensitivity'

A researcher's sensitivity is referred to often as 'theoretical sensitivity': the product of a continually evolving understanding of emerging research conclusions, where both understanding and conclusions are generated in relation to, and then become part of the researcher's total stock of 'knowledge-making' resources. A researcher's sensitivity is in a state of continual development.

In my own terms theoretical sensitivity translates as a 'critical sensitivity'. The idea of 'critical sensitivity' encapsulates what the researcher learns as a consequence of the ongoing dynamics of interaction between different forms and sources of data, and the interplay between the data gathering and analysis processes. It involves a self-critical attention to the researcher's own values, beliefs and interests. It is informed by examination of different sources and forms of data for implicit or assumed values,

beliefs and interests. It involves attention to the relations between each different sort of data.

Critical sensitivity is developed consciously and also as a result of constant critical analysis. It is not self-generating, but stimulated by reflection, questioning, and choices during the research process. 'Critical sensitivity' begins with self-critical awareness, and this stimulates its further development.

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) 'constant comparative analysis' can be understood, for my purposes as a 'constant critical analysis'. The ideas of 'critical sensitivity' and 'constant critical analysis' identify the roots, dynamics and relations of data generation, identification, analysis and interpretation. These processes are outlined in the model below. The model is based on Rowland (1984)

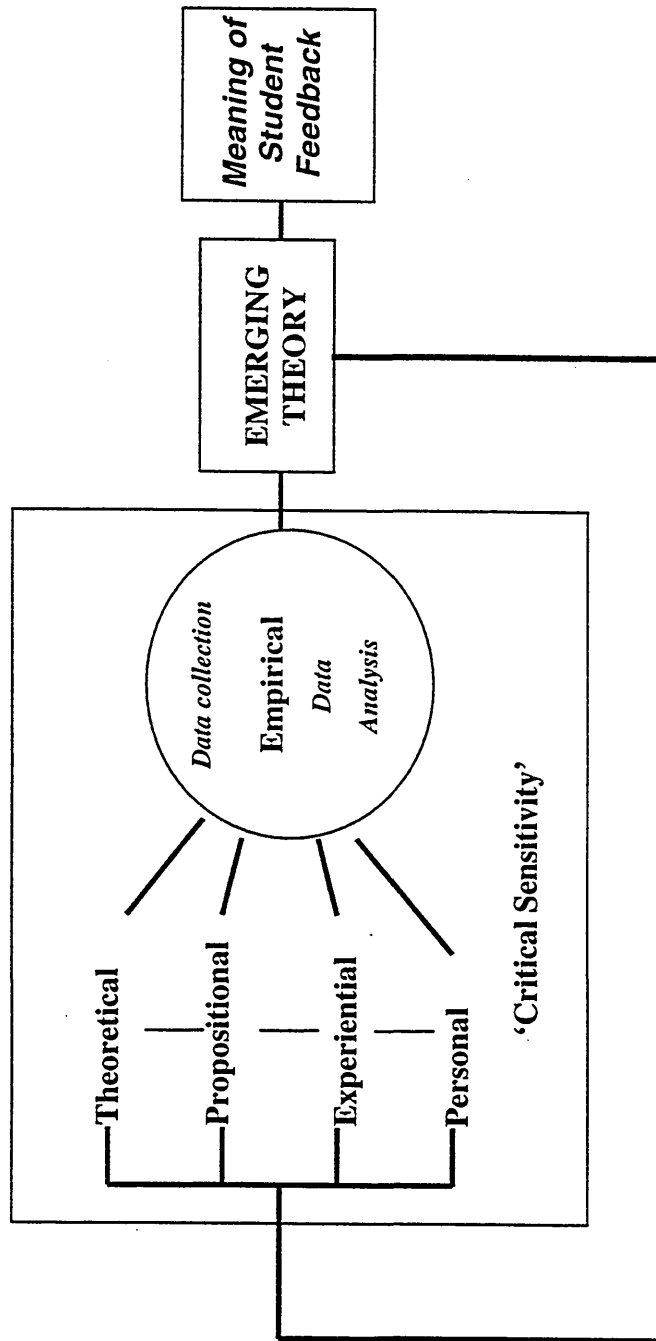


Figure One: Critical Sensitivity

What the model shows: The generation and analysis of data (*Empirical*) draws on and is informative of *Theoretical, Propositional, Personal* and *Experiential* knowledges *resources*. This work leads to insights, questions and *Emerging Theories* concerning the research question. As a result the researcher's 'sensitivity' to the emerging theories grows on the basis of increased insight, and the further development of means of interrogation. The Emerging Theories address the *Research Question* - in this case the Meaning of Student Feedback - and also become an addition to the knowledge resources available, and inform and interact with other knowledge resources.

Thus the 'central feature' of stages in data collection and analysis is an iterative process. The progress of the study was iterative owing to the nature of the continual interplay of knowledge resources, and the continuing interplay between the design, processes and outcomes of research questions and routes of enquiry. The research is also *reflexive* because the iterative process implicates me (it is my interpretative work). The the evolution of the research and my own development as researcher are interconnected and interdependent processes.

The interplay between ideas and processes provide a rich source of discontinuities, paradox, inconsistencies and contrasts. This provides an analytic force that prompts a set of further questions and understandings, and gives rise to the need to gather further data.

2.2. Sources, roles and status of data.

2.2.1. Literatures of student feedback

The idea that the literature is ‘data’ evolved over the course of the study. Its status as ‘data’ has changed in respect of the role it has played at each stage. Here I discuss the different forms and sources of literature that I identified. I set out the use I have made of them in analysis, and the further use I make of them in Sections One and Two of this study. There are three stages to this.

2.2.1.1 Stage One: use of literatures as orientation to student feedback.

My work on student feedback began with a literature search on ‘student feedback’. I placed few restrictions on the choice of literature; I selected as relevant to my search literature in which student feedback was the *central focus* and in which it was of only *secondary* (or even minimal) interest. I found that the latter literature constituted policy documents and texts issued by statutory agencies between 1987 and 1996ⁱ, research into quality management, and debate concerned with government policy for higher education. The former literature constituted empirical research, debate and practical guidelines into various methods of student feedback.

Five literatures: There are thus five main sources and forms of literature: empirical research into different student feedback methods; research into ‘quality’ management

and assessment frameworks; debate about government policy; the actual policy documents themselves; and literature related to staff development and the enhancement of teaching and learning.

One. The student evaluation questionnaire: The most frequently researched method of student feedback was the student evaluation questionnaire. Discussion considered the extent to which this method could be developed such that the results were reliable, valid and of use for curriculum development, the enhancement of teaching practices and students' learning, and the appraisal and development of lecturers' practice as professional teachers. Alternatively discussion centred on the development of a method that might be reliable, valid and of use for the purposes of performance assessments or within national accountability exercises. This literature is discussed in Chapter Three, Section One.

Two. 'Quality': Similarly, the second literature connected student feedback with policy developments in respect of the audit, assessment and enhancement of both the 'quality' of institutional management and the 'quality' of teaching and learning. Here student feedback was most frequently discussed as one technique or mechanism within larger institutional frameworks relating to 'quality', institutional management and teaching and learning practices. This literature is discussed in Chapter 5, Section One.

Three. 'Quality debate': The third literature concerned debate amongst higher education researchers and academics about developments in government policy and the

implications of this for the conditions and idea of higher education. This literature is discussed in Chapter 5, Section One.

Four. Policy: I located, as a fourth literature the actual policy documentation and the guidelines on 'quality' and codes of practice issued by statutory agencies as a result of government policy. These texts lay at the root of the first three literatures identified. My reading of the first three literatures had presented a range of questions through which to focus my analysis of this fourth literature. I had identified as key concepts ideas of 'management', 'performance', 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'accountability' and 'quality'. Questions relevant to student feedback concerned the role and status of the student, the student's relation to institutions and academic staff, and their motivations for studying. I paid attention to the discourse used to characterise, legitimate or propose new structures, practices and objectives, and new perspectives on or valuations of higher education. I examined the ideological assumptions, values and interests revealed within this discourse, and implicated in the structures, practices and objectives that were proposed. This literature is used throughout Section Two to organise and ground the interpretation and discussion of interview data.

Five. Institutional, educational and staff development: The final literature consisted of documents published by the associations, agencies or learned societies that represent institutions, disciplinary groups, different levels of academic staff, or those concerned with the development of practices of teaching and learning within institutions. The documents were often guides designed to outline the demands and implications of new policy stipulations, or practical guidelines offering advice and ideas to assist institutions

and academics with the incorporation of aspects of policy into practice. This literature is discussed in Chapter 3, Section One.

Audiences: Initially the role these literatures played in my research focused on my interests in understanding student feedback from different perspectives of various audiences - such as academic researchers, theoreticians of higher education, policy makers, institutional managers and higher education development practitioners. I began to formulate rough ideas of the motivations, interests and assumptions that grounded each perspective on student feedback and focused the nature of appraisal and critique.

Common themes and divisions: Each literature shared common concerns with, or made similar assumptions about elements of the contemporary government agenda, such as the idea of 'quality'. Perspectives on student feedback were similar to the extent that there were dominant and shared reasons for their respective concerns with student feedback. Literatures were distinguishable to the extent that their interests in, and concerns with student feedback were motivated by differing agendas, beliefs and audiences. However, the different literatures evidenced little interrelation or cross referencing.

This reading of student feedback 'literatures' developed my awareness of, and sensitivity to, themes shared across the 'field', to lines of demarcation, and to factors that proved divisive or contentious. I raised questions concerning the extent to which a

particular literature and its audience were engaged with particular issues to a greater degree than others.

2.2.1.2 Stage Two: Use of literature in conjunction with empirical analysis

Primary data: Subsequently I read these literatures as primary data, and in conjunction with analysis of interview data. I used the literatures to cross-examine my analysis of interview data, and vice versa. This cross examination both prompted searches for specific themes within the interview data, and generated insights into and developed my understanding of the issues and themes arising from my analysis of interview data.

Connections and disconnections: The cross referencing identified connections, disconnections, comparisons and contrasts on which I could reflect and question. Literatures and interview texts shared similar themes, such as policy terminology and discourse, contention over the ideological nature of policy or critiques of methods of student feedback. Divergence between students' and lecturers' views over, for example, the extent to which the student voice was 'legitimate' and 'valid' was also reflected within debates contained in the literatures. Alternatively, literatures sometimes omitted consideration of factors that appeared vital to either (or both) students and lecturers. I reflected on the ways that the theoretical understandings of student feedback were ill-founded, misguided or incomplete. Having learnt through analysis of interviews about the relation between policy demands and students' and lecturers' ideas of student

feedback, I was able to formulate ideas in respect of the status of these literatures as a theoretical 'knowledge-base',

2.2.1.3 Stage Three: The role of the literature in the structure of the study

Form and content: Within this study, the literature is used as primary data to structure, introduce and illustrate discussion and interpretation of interview data in Section Two. Analysis of government policy texts identified six sets of policy ambitions, interests and assumptions: student feedback is symbolic of and instrumental to the realisation of the sets of ambitions, interests and assumptions. The six chapters of Section Two each represent one of these sets. Second, I use the five literatures to illustrate the connections and disconnections between students and lecturers' views and theoretical understandings of student feedback.

Research outcomes and future theorisations, policy and practices: The process of re-conceptualising student feedback necessitates examination of the disjuncture of theory, policy and practice. It also necessitates the generation of an understanding that students' and lecturers' perceptions and experiences of student feedback are informed by theory, policy and practices or techniques of student feedback. The re-conceptualisation of student feedback is also a potential contribution to the theoretical knowledge-base of student feedback. It points to the inadequacies of current concepts

and practices of student feedback, and sustains this analysis whilst maintaining critical perspectives on national and institutional policy frameworks for student feedback.

2.2.2 Qualitative interview data: generation, analysis and interpretation

2.2.2.1. 'Meaning'

Van Dijk (1998) emphasises that personal meaning systems are patterns of ideas, or ideologies grounded in, and shaped by experiences that are fundamentally social and contextual in nature. The attempt to understand 'meaning' involves exploration of the ways in which student feedback is a construct of, and significant to the sense students' and lecturers' make of their own lives (M. Feldman 1995). From a phenomenological perspective 'meaning' identifies the perceived nature of a phenomenon, and locates it in a relation between consciousness and the material world (Husserl 1970, Merleau-Ponty 1962). Meaning lies in a relation from which neither subject nor object can be disconnected, and in which no determinate restrictions or causal relations apply.

My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. ... The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most surprising phenomena,

or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination (Merleau-Ponty 1962:x).

The phenomenological method involves description and representation of the meaning of phenomena in the experience of the individual; its goal is to stabilise and tease-out the layers of meaning in description, so that these can be worked with as an understanding of a particular phenomenon (Ashworth 1996, Giorgi 1995).

My approach to understanding student feedback as ‘meaning’ involves both phenomenological ‘sensibilities’ (Holstein and Gubrium 1998) and attempts to make sense of these in respect of the interpretative resources offered, and constraints imposed by the social, functional and structural contexts in which students’ and lecturers’ operate. The meaning of student feedback is a complex of perceptual constructs, and contains and reveals ongoing processes and outcomes of a student’s or lecturer’s engagement with student feedback within the context of higher education. ‘Meaning’ is revealed, and illustrated by, their reflexive interpretations and actions in response to their engagement with student feedback. Moreover that meaning bears relation to the supra-institutional context of their whole lives, personal beliefs, values and interests.

2.2.2.2. Interviews

Qualitative: In order to gain data that might be interrogated and interpreted for ‘meaning’, it was necessary to generate rich, qualitative descriptions, stories and explanations of students’ and lecturers’ perceptions and experiences. It was necessary

to speak with those who have used or participated in the practice of student feedback.

This form of investigation necessitates personalised discussion with individuals.

Flexibility: Semi-structured interviews produce data that captures richness of meaning and also offer a degree of flexibility so that avenues that prove interesting can be followed up in discussion (Smith 1995). Interviews that allow for flexibility and concentrate on personal meanings and experiences are truly qualitative (Janesick 1998). They provide texts that are rich, detailed and sufficiently personal to allow the researcher to focus on the variety of ways in which student feedback is meaningful to that person, to unravel some of the layers of those meanings, and to re-describe them with greater understanding of what, and how, student feedback ‘means’ to each individual.

Grounded and open: Janesick (1998) describes qualitative research as a ‘dance’, in which a central research question acts as a ‘backbone’ that both grounds the study and enables flexibility and openness throughout all stages of research. Extrapolating from this, I see that interviews require a defined *space* that both focuses discussion and yet provides an expanse to be explored. If interviews are set up to allow for flexibility and openness, the interviewer needs to be both disciplined and attentive so as to remain grounded in the question and focused on rich discussion, whilst simultaneously stretching out towards the participant’s ideas and concerns.

Loosely structured discussions: I decided to approach the interviews without a schedule of questions, but made it clear to participants that I was interested in their experiences of ‘communicating about teaching and learning with students/lecturers’. I told them that I would pick up on anything I thought might prove interesting to discuss further, that I didn’t understand, or that might lead to some mutual ideas and insights. I started each interview asking about them, and in general followed this with questions concerning their perceptions of their own role and the roles of others, and how they experienced their ‘work’ in the university.

Respect and reflection: This approach demanded both attentive listening and authentic warmth, respect, and interest in their experiences and opinions, and at the same time, immediate and concentrated reflection on issues that might prove fruitful to explore. No one interview covered the same ground, and each contains a good deal of frank expression, mutual misunderstanding, loss of memory and concentration, humour, and inspiration. These are characteristics perhaps typical of an intense conversation. Yet this is also evidence of how interviews are stilted by the mutually acknowledged instrumental purpose, despite attempts to create a more participant-centred dynamic (see below, 2.2.2.3).

Diversity: I decided to interview students and lecturers whose biographies were divergent. The emphasis on diversity was grounded in a desire to achieve, potentially,

as great a range of perspectives on student feedback as possible. There were three reasons for this. First it would prohibit attempts to derive causal relations and explanations for their views, based on *assumptions* about the significance of any common feature of their background. Second, it would protect against (false) (Kemmis 1980, Yin 1984) accusations of limited reliability and validity owing to the singularity of participants' backgrounds. Third, it was compatible with my rejection of the view that a sample population might be judged 'pure' for reason of presence of a spread of characteristics that are only presumed significant. Such a view implies both prior assumptions about, and definitions of whose experience is more or less meaningful, important or valid.

Participants: The process of finding and selecting participants varied and was not always in my firm control. I was however successful in achieving 'diversity'; I conducted interviews with 7 undergraduate students and 16ⁱⁱ academic staff from a total of 5 universities with various institutional histories. Details of the means I used to approach participants at each respective institution, and a brief biography of each participant are given below:

Means of approaching students

University One: 1960s Campus

Students from this university were contacted through a letter and sign-up form left at a desk in the reception of a Students' Union. A note from a third party known within the

Union for reason of her role as staff member was attached to the letter to encourage students to sign-up.

University Two: 1960s Campus

Students from this university were contacted through informal, unpremeditated and direct approaches by a third person during one lunch hour in the Students' Union cafe bar. The third party was known both to the students and to me, since I had worked in the Students' Union on a previous occasion.

University Three: Red Brick

Students from this university were contacted by a member of staff in a department whose courses were linked with others in the faculty. The students had been but were not currently being taught by the member of staff.

University Four: Post 1992

Students from this university were known to me personally through contacts I had in the city concerned.

Means of approaching lecturers

University Three

I contacted lecturers at this university by email, after having been given their addresses by a member of staff who had had contact with them as a group on previous occasions.

University Four

I contacted lecturers at this university by email, after their names had been suggested to me by a member of staff who had worked with them as individuals on previous occasions.

University Five: Civic

A personal contact at the university, who is a Senior Administrator, contacted a group of staff who were members of a working committee that she serviced. The Senior officer sent out my own covering letter and timetabled the interviews on my behalf.

Biographical details of students

Student [1]: Male. Third Year, Maths.

Student [2]: Male. Third Year, History and Politics. Retaking his third year having failed through illness the previous year.

Student [3]: Female. Recently graduated, Modern Languages. Still involved in the department through its extra-curricular activities.

Student [4]: Female. Second Year, Business Studies. Direct entrant into second year having completed HND at another university.

Student [5]: Male. First year, Biological Sciences.

Student [6]: Female. Third year, Business, Finance and Economics. Enrolled at university having worked for a few years after finishing 'A' Levels.

Student [7]: Male. First year, BEd Primary. Mature student, who enrolled to gain qualification as a teacher after having taught dance for many years on a peripatetic basis.

Biographical details of lecturers

Lecturer [1]: Male. Senior Lecturer, Engineering. New University [tape failed].

Lecturer [2]: Male. Senior Lecturer, Fractal Engineering. Red Brick University.

Lecturer [3]: Female. Senior Lecturer, Biological Sciences. New University.

Lecturer [4]: Male. Lecturer, Biomedical Sciences. Red Brick University.

Lecturer [5]: Female. Lecturer, Chemical Engineering. Red Brick University [tape failed].

Lecturer [6]: Male. Lecturer, Modern Languages. Red Brick University.

Lecturer [7]: Male. Post-Doc, Molecular Biology and Biotechnology. Red Brick University.

Lecturer [8]: Female. Temporary Lecturer, Molecular Biology and Biotechnology. Red Brick University [interview not taped].

Lecturer [9]: Male. Senior Lecturer, Chemical Engineering. Red Brick University.

Lecturer [10]: Female. Senior Lecturer and Director of Studies, Law. Civic University

Lecturer [11]: Female. Senior Lecturer, Education. Civic University.

Lecturer [12]: Male. Senior Lecturer, French. Civic University [tape failed].

Lecturer [13]: Male. Senior Lecturer, Electrical Engineering. Civic University.

Lecturer [14]: Male. Professor and Head of Department, Psychology. Civic University.

Lecturer [15]: Male. Senior Lecturer and Chair of Faculty Teaching Committee, Geography. Civic University.

Lecturer [16]: Male. Professor and Dean of Faculty, Veterinary Sciences. Civic University.

Each interview lasted between 50 to 80 minutes; the majority took place between May and December 1996, although I did interview one student much later in June 1997.

2.2.2.3. Interactions within the interview

Roles and relations: Masserik (1981) describes the 'rapport' interview as one in which the researcher is a 'human being in a role'. The 'depth' interview necessitates that researcher and participants are equal in the sense of 'peer' kinship. The course and outcomes of interviews are affected by factors including levels of researcher control, by inter-subjective and communicative dynamics between participants, by participants' assumptions and feelings about their roles and the purpose of the interview, and by dynamics originating in power relationships between participants (Banister et al 1994). In respect of my interviews analysis of this becomes complex, owing to my dual status as insider member of higher education and interviewer. It is also disrupted by the hybrid nature of my insider role, which was simultaneously student and more 'academic' researcher.

Interactions: Interactions were complex, changing and layered, and often depended on the age, level of seniority and discipline of the participant. The course, tone and content

of each interview was influenced by participants' interpretations of and responses to my role as interviewer, and by my own interpretation of and response to the participant's attitude to me.

A further, and significant influence originated in our own respective roles and identities within the university setting. To students I appeared as a 'peer', and able to identify with and relate to their own experiences. For lecturers, I was researcher in an area about which they had relatively little expertise. At the same time I was also younger, research student engaged in a task that each had successfully completed. This hybrid identity meant that I could challenge their views as well as ask naive questions.

No one person adopted the same perspective throughout the course of the interview, for a variety of reasons to do with changing levels of comfort or interest in the discussion, greater understanding of my role or my personal interests and character, or owing to fluctuations in their perspective on my own identity as interviewer, student, academic researcher, and insider. The interviews contained illustration of the differences in interpersonal dynamics when relations are more, or less, formal.

Some lecturers interpreted the interview as an opportunity to have an intellectual tussle regarding student feedback, to 'tell' me about student feedback in theoretical terms, or to argue with my questions. In addition, the one lecturer most immediately willing to talk about student feedback candidly and openly was a person I had known for some years: I knew lines of enquiry that he would relate to and I could take more risks

through challenging his views. In return, he knew I would relate to his stories but also pick up on the difference between the personal and 'official' perspectives he offered.

These reflections became significant within the analysis and interpretation of the interviews, in respect of my interests in academics' roles and identities and their relations with students.

Responses and image making: Goffman (1980) argues that adults are concerned with others' perceptions and interpretations of them in respect of the rules and demands that apply to a given social setting. He argues that people play multiple roles in respect of the particular image they give of themselves. Bakhtin claims 'multiple voicedness' as an ontological condition (Wertsch 1991); individuals act in dialogical relation to their perceptions of other persons, circumstances and contexts. Each individual is variously competent, conscious and in control of their own reflexive relation and response to their social situation.

My interview texts contain traces of the impact of social dynamics in the data gathering process. I describe two instances of this. Sufficient evidence is provided in the extracts I use in Section Two.

The first concerns the extent to which students and lecturers were concerned to present a particular 'image' of themselves during the interview. This is one theme that *also* arose within the substance of students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions of student

feedback. That this dynamic can also be traced in the text in respect of my own interactions with participants is both valuable and also unsurprising, given that the study is a piece of insider research.

Participants were concerned to appear 'good interviewees' in respect of their will to address my own interests. They questioned their own understanding of both my research interests and also the purpose of some questions, or spoke in terms that suggested reflection prior to the interview. Participants were concerned to present a 'good' image of themselves. This meant different things for each. Some responses switched between official and informal perspectives on student feedback, that is, accounts that would reflect the institutional or departmental image of itself or accounts that would make convincing impression that they were diligent student or a responsible professional.

A second example of the connection between the interview process and the themes generated from their analysis was the stake that motivates 'image-making'. It was frequently claimed that feedback given or received would influence others interpretations of the lecturer's or student's disposition and character. For example, students give feedback that they feel will be received positively by lecturers and lead the lecturer to think well of them. Alternatively the student might be unwilling to upset a lecturer through unpleasant, or unjustified criticism. This would put a current or anticipated relationship at risk. Similarly lecturers discussed how student feedback results had impact on their reputation as a professional amongst their peers.

Within the interviews, it was clear that the switch, from 'official line' to personal account was motivated on similar grounds. For example, on receipt of a copy of the interview transcript one lecturer asked that I did not discuss his interview amongst the colleagues in the department whom I also know. He felt that his relationship with them would be damaged by the critical comments he had made about them. He was also worried that his admissions of lack of expertise and of ambivalence to student feedback would undermine his credibility amongst colleagues. One student returned her copy of the interview transcript to me having 'corrected' her grammar, broken sentences and slang. She wanted to give the impression that she was an articulate and literate student.

Questions: Questions asked within an interview effect different qualities of response.

This is often considered a bias to, or restriction on qualities of the data. In my view, restrictions on, and changes to the direction of exploration within an interview is a matter of levels of relative power and control each participant commands within the interview.

Within a detailed, lengthy qualitative interview, the extent to which a question is 'leading' (Kvale 1996a) is an issue that arises in relation to both levels of agency the participant assumes or is able to assume, and the role s/he wishes to, or is able to play. Questions are open to discussion, and maybe queried, or arise naturally on the basis of incomplete understandings or a desire to know more.

From these perspectives the idea that a question has determinant influence on the words selected or stories related by the participant appears questionable. However it is feasible that under coercive, pressured and risky environments, or where the participant is concerned to 'please' (or at least not upset) the researcher it is more likely that the participant will present views that s/he believes the researcher wants (Banister et al 1994).

Voices within the research: Qualitative research is concerned to 'give voice' to research participants' own personal perspectives and meanings (Janesick 1998).

The ability of a research participant to 'achieve voice' is a question of whether they are able define a situation for themselves within the interview, to address their own concerns, and to have that 'voice' heard throughout stages of data gathering analysis and interpretation. These issues involve and reflect the following five concerns.

First the researcher has to be aware of, and responsive to, power dynamics and control relationships within the interview situation. Second the researcher must reflect critically on the extent to which their own interpretations of the interviews, during analysis at latter stages, distorts or represents a reasonable picture of the participants' intended meaning.

Third, the extent to which the participants achieve 'voice' reflects the researcher's own research ethic. This involves recognition that a researcher works to their own advantage

on the personal details and experiences offered by others. The researcher should acknowledge that this knowledge belongs to those others throughout and after the research (Altheide and Johnson 1997, Siraj-Blatchford 1994). The ethic also involves a commitment to care about the relationships that qualitative research creates (Bannister 1981) both during and after the interview; the research process has impact on the participant because it stimulates recall, reflection and learning concerning issues that the person may not necessarily have otherwise experienced or desired.

Fourth, questions of 'voice' are closely connected to the issue of empowerment.

Drawing on critical perspectives on empowerment, 'voice' depends on the researcher's awareness that research work with human subjects is a fully political activity. Research has political consequences, and should demonstrate politically astute aims (Carr and Kemmis 1986, hooks 1989, Mac an Ghaill 1989, Siraj-Blatchford 1994, Troyna 1994).

Fifth, similar questions might be raised by those who see 'empowering' research as a process that aims to work on a mutual basis towards shared learning, through equitable levels of control over questioning, and mutual negotiation over the direction of research aims and means. From this perspective research is for the purpose of developing mutual understanding *between* participants *as well as* mutual learning about the questions being researched (Carr and Kemmis 1986, Elliott 1991, Freire 1973, Heron 1996).

Again, the issues of voice and empowerment are pertinent as a theme generated in analysis of the interview data. I return to them with full discussion in Section Two. In Section Two, chapter 4 deals with the empowerment of the student. Chapters 3 and 6

deal with the role student feedback plays in the ‘professionalisation’ of the lecturer as teacher.

2.2.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

2.2.3.1 Conversations within the research

In order to make sense of my work at any given stage in the research, my attention shifts in centri-petal and centri-fugal directions; my analysis originates in but extends creatively from interview data; questions that arise from engagement with other sources of data can be reflected back on the interview data. These research qualities and dynamics are usefully characterised as ‘conversations’. This indicates that there is a reflexive dialogue between the different dynamics and outcomes of the research process that stimulates further questioning.

The idea that ‘conversations’ exist *within* the research is an extrapolation on Kvale’s (1996a, 1996b) concept of the research interviews as a process of exchange of view, or ‘InterViews’. My own interpretation also draws on the concept of the hermeneutic-circle, a process of continual interplay between both part and whole, where part and whole exist in dialectic relation. In terms of qualitative research analysis, my own attention shifts from the concrete to the abstract, from structure to content, from externally derived insights to internally produced understanding. Ideas concerning the meaning of student feedback develop as I shift from reflection on data to analysis of

theory and literatures, from reflection on the processes of the research to analysis of their product.

2.2.3.2 Stages in analysis

My analysis evolved into three distinct stages. Stage One was inspired by phenomenological methodology, and provided the basis for the formulation of my own 'critical sensitivity'. Stage Two adopts an approach characteristic of grounded theory, defined as a process of 'constant critical analysis'. It is grounded in the data in terms of the results of Stage One. It also draws on and stimulates the development of my 'critical sensitivity'. Stage Three is work represented by this study, reflects the outcomes of Stage One, and is a product of analytical work of Stage Two.

2.2.3.3 Stage One: Familiarisation, coding and the structuring of analysis

This stage involves six different principles or processes.

One. Rejecting assumptions: From the perspective of phenomenological methodology (Ashworth 1996, Giorgi 1995) analysis involved major efforts to reject prior assumptions about the meaning of data. The rejection of prior assumptions rests on the researcher's disciplined attention to, and self-awareness of their own filters and frames

of values, beliefs and assumptions. This reinforces the need to engage in self-critical reflection.

Two. Familiarisation: The process of transcription is invaluable for the purposes of becoming familiar with the substantive content of an interview (Charmaz 1995). I transcribed the interviews myself. The process of repeatedly re-engaging with each interview by listening to the interview tapes enhanced my sensitivity to the individuals and their concerns, and helped to root the interviews alive in my mind. It helped me to remember non-verbal, expressive and physical interactions - which are difficult to translate from spoken to written form (Kvale 1996a, 1996b).

Three. Description: The first step involved phenomenological description of the interview. This aids the process of familiarisation and reflection on each interview, and is a key means of understanding student feedback from the perspectives of students and lecturers. The process requires that presuppositions about the range of potential meanings, objects of meaning or sources of meaning are set aside. The process of re-description proceeded as follows.

Four. Meaningful 'Sections' - not Meaning 'Units': Detailed 'bracketing' of each unit of meaning proved impractical, given the amount of interview material I had to analyse. I made several initial attempts at breaking down the interviews, selecting at first 'substantive' issues, and subsequently 'metaphors' as units of potential meaning.

I chose to focus on participants' use of metaphors, or metaphorical phrases because these incidents appeared significant for the following reasons:

- metaphors were used as a substitute for lengthier explanations of complex ideas;
- metaphors were used to highlight or enforce the significance of an issue;
- metaphors link together multiple ideas: they express the experience of higher education by reference to ideas external to that context that communicate meaning with greater assurance of immediacy;
- metaphors contain, and connote multiple ideas at the same time as these are rendered meaningful in terms of the local, circumscribed context;
- metaphors demand focused interpretative and creative work on the part of the researcher;
- the meanings identified during interpretation will reflect associations inferred by the researcher, and yet they will also be justified if these make sense in terms of the context in which the metaphor is expressed;
- the interpretation of metaphors is necessarily creative – the researcher brings his or her own ideas to the text and is thus stimulated through processes of imagination and questioning. This extrapolates from, and expands upon the immediately communicated meaning;
- the process ‘fixes’ the original metaphor as reference to the new and alternative interpretations at the same time as it ‘fixes’ the extract in memory.

The following sample from the analysis at this stage shows metaphors contained in interviews with one lecturer. Analysis proceeded thus:

[1] Selection of metaphor from text; the metaphors were coded by interview and page number in the first column.

- [2] Inclusion of a brief extract from the original text with which to contextualise the metaphor. This provides both further ideas to build into the meanings extrapolated and interpreted from the text, and also acts as guide or constraint on that process.
- [3] Column four lists a range of potential interpretations. These both made sense, but also demanded that the text be further investigated to check on, or embellish these interpretations; they generate questions.

Analysis of metaphors

<u>Int/Page</u>	<u>Metaphor</u>	<u>Textual Extract</u>	<u>Context</u>
06/02	Obstacle	And I think that's a major <u>obstacle</u> for a lot of lecturers because they are not sure about what they are doing when they start.	The criteria for being a lecturer do not include the ability to teach/ formal training in teaching; there is no support for development as teachers.
06/05	Maoist	I'm not in favour of you know, some sort of <u>Maoist</u> criticism and self-criticism.	There should be some sort of monitoring of lecturers by peers but it needs to be non-threatening and not about exposure.
06/08	Yellowed lecture notes	The lecturer actually wants to be there and is talking to them rather than happening to be standing there reading out those <u>yellowed</u> <u>lecture notes</u> that have been there, been read out for the last 20 years.	The lecturer likes not to lecture at people and wants to be flexible according to the needs and interests of the students, and in respect of developments in his own thinking. Has to constantly update his own plans.
06/13	Fifth Columnist	I spent more time with the lecturers than I did with the students, so I think they thought of me as a <u>Fifth Columnist</u> within the student body.	He had been a mature student; whether students talk together about their lecturers but not in the presence of the lecturer.
06/15	Constant barrier Curtain	You know it always seems to me that there is this <u>constant barrier</u> , like a curtain between staff and students which is very, very difficult to break through and get an honest opinion on either side	Whether students' comments are likely to be truthful; that the staff and students find communication problematic

Although helpful in terms of familiarisation and generation of insights, analysis based on selection of metaphor was not unproblematic and proved dissatisfying. The reasons for this are as follows:

- the selection of criteria is profoundly non-phenomenological, because it is predicated on prior-judgements, based on the researcher's own assumptions about and interpretations of the instances of meaning that are significant or most significant.
- the use of decontextualised words or phrases is reductionist, and dislocates interview text from its own context and structure, in which and through which it achieves its full meaning. It devalues and/or ignores the essentially co-produced nature of the text that belongs in part to a person about whom we learn only from the entirety of the interview as a whole text and as a composite of other non-verbal signals.
- a metaphor operates meaningfully within a text on the basis of connotation and association, via multiple relations to concepts and images external to the text itself. To this extent meaning is achieved after interpretative decisions have been made about the connotations that make best sense within a given context. However that selection is made from a potentially infinite range of possibilities, that exist first and foremost in the imaginative repertoire of the interpreter. Metaphor transcends but demands context. Thus it is a false and self-negating move to attempt to *find* meaning by removing metaphors contained in interview transcripts from their original texts.

- in many ways however, the concept of metaphor is fully coherent with a phenomenological philosophy, echoing the 'play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations' that construct the 'closely woven fabric' of Merleau-Ponty's 'real'. Thus although the *use* of them is problematic from a strict phenomenological methodological perspective, my interpretative work with them and how I understood them led to further paths of enquiry later in the research. It also generated insights that then 'lived in my mind' as symbolised by the neat metaphor or metaphorical phrase.

I wanted to establish a frame against which to both reflect and break down the content of each interview. However I was in a paradoxical situation: I was concerned not to presume meaningful content prior to analysis, and yet had not analysed for meaning.

Five. Return to the literatures: This point in interview analysis coincided with a significant stage in the review of the literatures of student feedback. I had established that 'quality' generated voluminous debates that were full of contention, conflict, confusion and anxious concerns. The literature itself also appeared fractious and polemical to the extent that it generated further debate.

Both these readings of the literature appeared to parallel levels of negativity and concern within the interviews. Ideas of 'contention', 'conflict' and confusion' were suitable as a frame against which to break-down the interviews into manageable chunks. Without a great deal of reflection I highlighted passages in each interview in which views were

expressed with assertion or emphasis - as opposed to explicit statements of moments of contention, conflict or confusion.

Interviews were kept as a whole, and used in their entirety at all latter stages of the research, both for reference and quotation.

Six. Extraction, Coding and Précis: Charmaz (1995) argues that the process of coding is helpful to analysis because it highlights aspects of the interview to the researcher and makes the researcher sensitive to them; it 'holds still' particular sections of text in ideational form and calls attention to them.

Analysis and coding proceeded in the following way:

- [1] I coded the highlighted passages numerically according to their sequence in the interview.
- [2] I extracted the text containing the highlighted passages.
- [3] I then re-described these in summary form to the length of a phrase or sentence, using the participant's own words and 'logic' to retain a sense of the participant's own perspective.
- [4] At times two distinct précis were necessary, either because there appeared to be different issues live within one passage, or because two interpretations were obvious and possible. These were coded as subsections of the same code.
- [5] I then grouped the individual précis according to crudely shared/common concerns.

- [6] One individual précis often fitted two or more groups.
- [7] I re-described each group of summary statements using my own words. These descriptive paragraphs attempted to capture and represent the detail, chaos, layers, hesitancy and multiplicity of perspectives. The paragraphs also contained contradictions; participants were both unaware of these contradictions, and also acknowledged that they held contradictory views. The re-descriptions incorporated into a single paragraph a complex of meanings that were multi-dimensional and involved explanations of emotions and reactions to *other* ideas and experiences.
- [8] The passages were given a brief but descriptive title, in order to highlight themes within the paragraph and to 'hold ideas still'.
- [9] The passages were then indexed alphabetically.

I worked with each interview in turn to the final point of re-description, a process that took an average of five days, depending on the length of the original interview. The sequential nature of the re-description meant that I did not cross-refer during the process of analysis, and all the outcomes listed below were kept separately according to the participant.

Outcomes of Stage One: At the end of this stage I had the following forms of analysis:

- complete interview transcripts: labelled according to date, institution, discipline and level of progression in study or academic career;
- sets of summarised statements: coded numerically, to locate them according to their sequence in the interview transcript;
- lists of interview extracts;
- groups of summarised statements for each interview;
- a set of re-described paragraphs for each interview: coded alphabetically and with a descriptive title.

The length and intensity of time spent with each interview meant that I attuned myself to both content and structural aspects of the interview, to the nuance and detail of perspectives, to a sense of overarching logic/rationale for the views expressed, and to the personal character of the participant. Nevertheless I was developing my own ideas concerning themes contained within the whole data-set of 19 interviews.

2.2.3.4 Stage Two. Iterative and integrative analysis

At this stage the phenomenological focus shifted towards an approach characteristic of grounded theory, that I define as a process of ‘constant critical analysis’. It is grounded in the data in terms of the results of Stage One. It also draws on and stimulates the development of my ‘critical sensitivity’.

Themes: On completing Stage One I had established general categories for the themes in the meaning of student feedback. Figure Two shows the general themes that allowed conceptual 'grouping' of outcomes of Stage One of the analysis of the meaning of student feedback. Each theme category reflects the titles given to the paragraphs at stage [7] in the analysis process described above. They are detailed beneath explanation of the model.

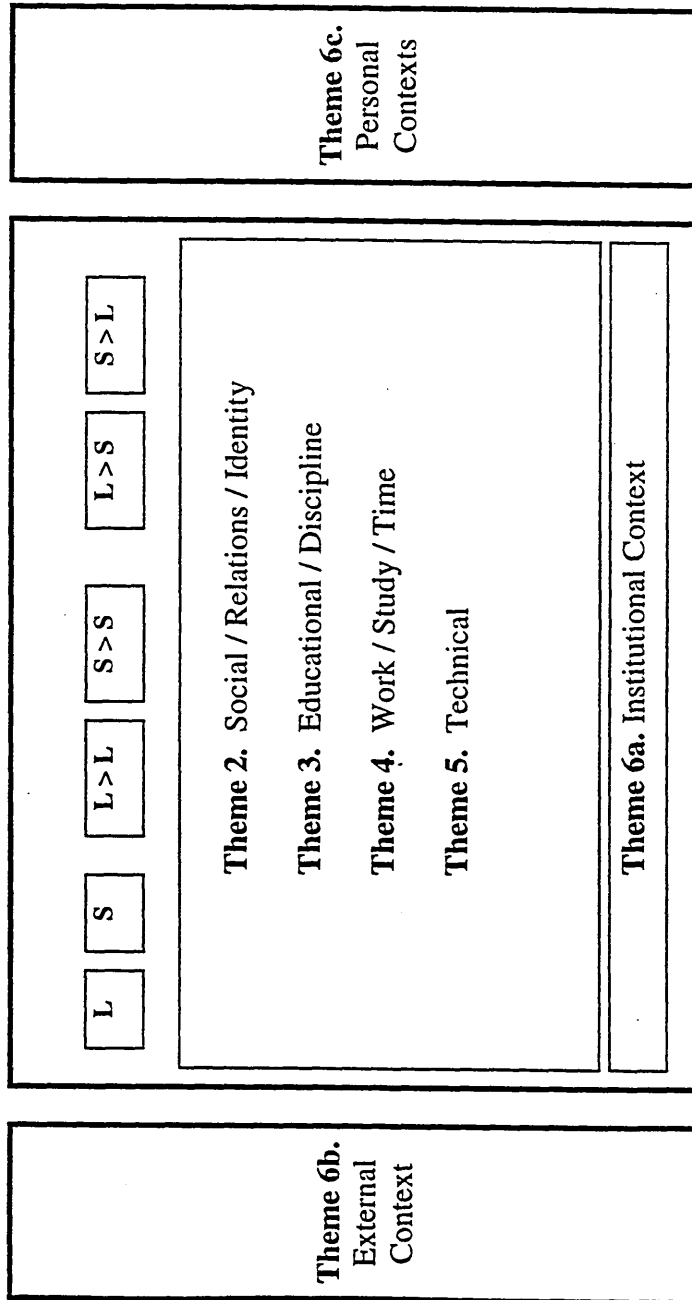


Figure Two: Themes within the meaning of student feedback

Notes to explain Figure Two: Themes within the central box concern perceptions and experiences of student feedback that relate to issues to do with higher education.

The two side boxes concern perceptions and experiences of student feedback that relate to external contexts of government policy and the personal contexts provided by participants' life-histories.

The series of boxes to the top of this central box reflect how students' and lecturers' views on each theme diverge and coincide. Within each single interview, it is possible to find continuity, discontinuity and contradiction. It is also possible to examine for discontinuities and continuities internal to a participant group and across groups. Students and lecturers also reflect on these themes in terms of what they feel other students or lecturers think about the particular issues. Additionally, students take a view on other students, lecturers, and on what they think lecturers think of students. Likewise, lecturers take a view on other lecturers, on students and on what they think students think of lecturers.

The theme categories focus on the following issues:

Theme 1.

The significance of 'other' people involved in, or taken into account during student feedback. Lecturers and students took a view on each other and their relations with each other, on their peers, and their relations with peers.

Theme 2.

Communication and interaction with other people.

Self expectations of roles, powers and responsibilities.

Expectations of others' roles, powers and responsibilities.

Theme 3.

The nature of higher educational study or teaching.

Teaching-learning activities.

The significance of the conceptual and theoretical base of the particular discipline.

Theme 4.

The processes, tasks and time-demands of work and study.

The longitudinal nature of academic study and of learning.

The instantaneous nature of student feedback.

Theme 5.

Technical concerns with methods and procedures of student feedback.

Validity, reliability and utility of results.

Theme 6: The above themes are located within a meta-theme, 'context'

6a) Internal context: cultures, structures, academic and social norms of the institutional / higher education context.

6b) External policy context: language, terminology, structures, technologies, political agenda.

6c) Students and lecturers referred to external contexts such as family, school, other universities and alternative occupations.

The Utility of Themes; convergence and divergence: At Stage Two in the analysis, I used the theme categories as 'emerging theories'. Whilst each converged in terms of the object of attention, the general 'emerging theories' necessarily contained various and conflicting views. I investigated a single 'emerging theory' through the views contained in single interviews and then again across the various interviews within a single participant group. Discontinuity within and across interviews was helpful, because it serves to disrupt and challenge an emerging theory in as many ways as possible. Continuities across the interviews in a participant group were also subjected to further interrogation and analysis by comparison and contrast between the two lecturer and student participant groups.

Extending the analysis: Analysis progressed by further reference to the data, and to other sources of data, such as the literatures of student feedback. The analysis process made use of propositional knowledge in order to interrogate the emerging theories. It also used the developing emerging theories to inform further critique of the literatures of student feedback and government policy. The following example illustrates these latter two means of extending analysis.

Example of the Analysis Process; ‘Methodology’: One category of meaning focused on lecturers’ and students’ ideas and problems in respect of the validity, reliability, objectivity, utility and ethics of student feedback. These are methodological concerns that connected with areas of propositional knowledge with which I was becoming familiar in respect of my own research methodology. Their ideas and problems suggested the following *methodological concerns*:

- Validity
 - what is the concept of validity which students and lecturers refer to or imply?
 - to what extent is this concept reflected in or implicit to the methods they experience?
- Utility
 - what sort of information do students and lecturers find useful?
 - what are the tests of validity and reliability that apply to this sort of information?
 - what methods would generate this sort of information?
 - what interests are implicit to this ‘useful’ information?
- Ethics
 - on what grounds is student feedback an ethical or unethical activity?
 - on what grounds is student feedback ethical or unethical information?
- Suited to the nature of subjects and objects?
 - on what basis would valid information still remain of little value?

- are the methods problematic for reasons other than the ‘ethics’ ‘validity’, ‘reliability’ or utility of the information generated?
- what method or process would students and lecturers find more amenable?
- are the conditions for this process available to them?

The process of addressing these questions raised issues and thoughts that stimulated and informed my understanding of the ‘contention’, ‘controversy’ and ‘confusion’ of student feedback. The process also informed and stimulated my examination of theories of student feedback practice, such as guidelines and codes of practice, practitioner oriented texts and empirical research into methods of student feedback. Repeated examination of these texts revealed the following issues about the the *character of the literature*:

- Methods
 - the method students and lecturers experience most frequently is that most frequently researched and advocated.
- Demands for Information
 - the form of information required as ‘good practice’ by government policy concerned with institutional management implied the use of the method most commonly experienced.
- Blame the student

- problems with validity, reliability and utility are interpreted as a reflection of students' disposition or enthusiasm.
- Lack of literature
- methods that students and lecturers preferred were rarely discussed in the literatures.
- Meeting the demands of government policy
- practitioner literature was dominated by concerns with facilitating pragmatic responses to the demands of government policy.
- space was given to discussion of teaching 'techniques' and 'procedures'.
- space was given to the techniques and procedures practitioners might use to enhance their teaching.

It was evident that the literature assumed interests and perspectives on student feedback that contrasted with those expressed by students and lecturers. This conclusion resulted in a further set of questions concerning the reasons for this apparent contradiction.

These questions were of direct value for the development of my '*emerging theories*':

- Contention
- reflects contest over the ideological and political assumptions, interests and ambitions represented by the idea of 'quality'; practices associate with 'quality' are thus subject to contest.

- Validity
 - the dominant concept of validity is implicit to the management theories advocated by government policy; this is reflected in the management practices and techniques compatible with the management theory; the method of student feedback must fit within this paradigm.
 - the policy agenda devalues and delegitimizes alternative methods; these are the methods of most value to lecturers and students; this is a source of contention.

These conclusions indicated that it was necessary to seek and investigate different sorts of propositional knowledge. For example I drew on critical management theory, and turned to educational theory that might explain the relationship between the process of generating information and the perceived utility of that information.

2.2.4.3 Stage Three. The centrality of context.

The outcomes of Stages One and Two were:

- critical understanding of themes within the ‘meaning’ of student feedback;
- a set of perspectives and arguments (emerging theories) that originated in, and stem from examination of those themes; and
- a set of perspectives and arguments (emerging theories) that have developed *during the process* of coming to understand those themes.

As set out in Figure Two, initial analysis demonstrated that the ‘meaning’ of student feedback was grounded in relation to, and reflected national, institutional, teaching-learning and personal contexts. It became necessary to understand the reasons for and implications of this finding.

Praxis: The perspective that ‘meaning’ can be understood as *praxis* was relevant to these questions. Praxis locates meaning in, and in tension with, ongoing experiences, perceptions and actions in respect of a circumscribed context.

Within the university, students and lecturers ‘make sense’ of their activity by reference to the range of categories, concepts, and discourses available within that context; they *interpret* student feedback and *act on* these interpretations. At the same time, interpretation and action on student feedback *creates* new categories, concepts and discourses. These then become available as interpretative resources. As praxis, the meaning of student feedback can be understood as an ongoing process that is irreducible from locally circumscribed interpretative resources, motivations and constraints.

Furthermore, the university is located within a socio-economic, political and cultural context: those who act within the university also act outside the university. Publicly available frames, categories, concepts and discourses, are also resources available to construct the meaning of student feedback.

Dialectic relation: A perspective on meaning as praxis locates the meaning of student feedback in a dialectic relation: reinterpretations of student feedback give rise to new interpretations of the context. This is the context *in which* the meaning of student feedback is located and *to which* it is related. New interpretations of the context generate new interpretative resources and thus produce new meanings of student feedback. The dialectic relation is thus change oriented. The process and outcome of change is unlikely to be coherent, free of tension, predictable or free of contradiction.

It is the purpose of Section Two of this study to explore the meaning of student feedback from the perspective of a contextually circumscribed praxis, and to understand the nature and significance of the complex and changing relations and interactions between student feedback and the context of higher education.

2.3. The Role of the Researcher in the Biography of the Research

Hermeneutics: Hermeneutic philosophy holds that in ontological terms, human perception, interpretation and action is a reflexive responsiveness to, an interaction with, and the production of, social life and organisation. Giddens (1993:170) argues that the challenge for 'social scientists' is to recognise that their knowledge and actions cannot transcend society, but are embedded within, are related to, and become part of society. Society is transformed through human reflexive responsiveness with and within socially produced conditions; thus social scientific knowledge and action is contingent on, is located within and has impact on society:

Hermeneutics is based on the belief that systems of meaning are constituted and transformed through human action and interaction. Meaning systems are the objects of social science, but also the conditions to which, and of which, a social scientist (and social scientific knowledge) is subject.

Extricating self: Charmaz (1995) argues that the concern to eliminate the self from research reflects an attempt at 'realist' theory making in qualitative research. From a hermeneutic perspective, a social scientist's search for a reality that lies external to human beings is self-defeating and contradictory, because society, social actors and social scientists are bounded by, and products of, a social 'reality' that is at the same time the product and construct of their own action.

The ‘taken for granted’: The researcher’s task is to make explicit the shared, ‘taken for granted’ (Gadamer, 1989, Garfinkel 1967, Schutz 1964 - see Crossley 1996:92) meanings and processes that both ground and enable social and inter-subjective activity. Reflexive interpretation and action within society demands ‘stability’ of meaning, whilst the reproduction of society depends on the reflexive self-monitoring of actors.

The basis of new understanding, and the possibility of change is founded on initial stimulation of awareness of what is *not* understood, followed by an exploration and extension towards that unknown. Further, the stimulation of awareness and the ability to ‘move’ towards a new understanding is contingent on rendering explicit what *is* known, what *is* shared and ‘taken for granted’. It is at the point of recognition of an ‘unknown’ via the recognition of the known that discrepancies and puzzles, confusions and contrasts can be clarified as problems, and a range of potentially fruitful paths for exploration defined.

The biography of the research: The impact of my own experiences external to the research is one a dialectic tension, and continual reflexive movement and shift. This shifting involves the relation between what I had ‘taken for granted’ and new understanding. The relation is contingent on the experience of confusion, contrast or discrepancy and its recognition as ‘unknown’, not understood, or not explained. The experience of uncertainty and puzzlement both *prompted* self-reflexive monitoring, and was *rendered explicit by* self-reflexive monitoring of my perception, interpretation and action. Uncertainty and puzzlement are periods of insecurity; the recognition of a clear

problem or alternative perspective, often follows a defensive, and less virtuous-sounding, reaction such as frustration, anger or value-judgement.

2.3.1 Personalised sketches of the biography of the research

Sections 2.3.1.1 – 2.3.1.3 chart incidents within the progression of this research when I felt a need to recognise, understand and challenge what I had until then ‘taken for granted’. They illustrate the impact on the research of experiences of discrepancy, confusion and contrast, paradox and contradiction. Within this it is often the *process* of puzzling through experiences that is creative and productive. The results of this process have contributed to my research in various ways, such as the derivation of direct insights, the development of sets of questions, the development of empathetic understanding, greater self-reflexive capacity and an extended ‘critical sensitivity’.

2.3.1.1 Insider research.

Moves and shifts: M. Feldman (1995) describes, as deconstruction, the exploration of how a change in the context for meaning and action changes what it is possible to mean or do. Shifts in context, role and identity and the apprehension of paradox, contradiction and discrepancy, all offered me a space for inquiry, questioning and understanding.

Study for a PhD takes place within a higher educational context. This study, which focuses on higher education, was undertaken within that same context. I had a dual role-identity: a hybrid researcher of / student in higher education. I was based at two universities in the same city. I was also active as a student member of the universities outside the research. These personal biographical factors have been significant to the research in three ways.

Participant-researcher: During the course of my time spent at the two universities I engaged in activities that shadowed the political, social and conceptual territory of student feedback. I became a student representative as Chair of the Students' Union Postgraduate Committee. I engaged at the highest levels of University Committees; some of these were working groups concerned with teaching-related and 'quality'-related issues.

At the same time, I was a researcher involved in academic study of an activity that is, in certain respects, a means to engage students in the democratic decision-making processes of the university. Thus the subject of and territory for this activity as a student-participant was, at the same time, the object and context of my research. The territory and tasks I was involved with as a student representative were also those I was researching and attempting to understand.

This dual role and identity involved a shift between my role as participant-observer and role as external researcher; both roles and identities were circumscribed by the same context: higher education.

Postgraduate students, a hybrid identity: Post-graduate students are involved in relationships with academics that involve a power dynamic. They also build friendships with academic staff, like they do with other students. They work - in seminars, supervision meetings and conferences - with academic staff as colleagues.

The significant aspect of these different relationships is that what appeared possible or acceptable to do or say changed in respect of my relation to others - as student, friend or colleague. These dynamics were highly dependent on the context for action, and the formality of that context - there is a difference between a small group meeting and a seminar presentation, a coffee room and a University Committee meeting.

Sensitivity to these phenomena and their implication for expression and action was significant: it connected with, and raised in status, a theme central to the 'meaning' of student feedback.

Playing each role to my own advantage: Within any setting I was able to act as insider conversation-partner or co-participant. When student feedback came up in conversation I could empathise with both student and academic perspectives. During informal, day-to-day conversations with friends - both student and academic - I gained further insight

into issues that particularly concerned them, and, at the same time, tested understandings, or raised issues arising from my own research.

Participation: On University Committees I had frequent experience of discussions about university policy and strategy concerning the requirements of 'quality'. I participated in the HEQC Continuation Audit, and was involved in developing the university's response to the draft report. I also joined in with a Teaching Quality Assessment visit in the department where I had been an undergraduate. In all of these situations I was student speaking from and for the student perspective. I was also well informed both *about* the academic perspective, and *from* an academic perspective: I had a level of expertise in the theoretical principles and critical issues that these issues raised. At the same time, and from each different perspective, I was also an 'observer': I used the insights gained from these experiences to develop my own understanding of my research. For example I could sit in a University Committee meeting and observe how academics reacted to each other, to me as a student and to the issues with which they were dealing.

I also worked as a practitioner. I collaborated with professional administrators to develop ways of constructing and approaching student feedback practices. I drew on my research to develop practices that I believed both students and lecturers thought more amenable.

These activities all lent insight into the micro-detail of, and cultural perspectives brought to bear on the management work of university academics and professional administrators.

2.3.1.2 Paradox and Contradiction

My hybrid identity, role and perspective was a source of tension and stimulated my awareness of tensions. This section gives one example of such a situation.

An ‘equal’ in discussion: In my role as representative I had formal status as a ‘full’ member of an academic committee, with rights of access to discussions, agenda and minutes according to statute. However I also experienced exclusion. The difference in my role as student and other committee members’ roles as academics constituted a power dynamic. This is a reflection of the hierarchical relations and claims to greater authority that are traditionally associated with, and legitimated by, academic status. The power dynamic operated to diminish my relative status and, hence, my warrant of voice and the value or perceived legitimacy of my contributions.

There was a paradox in this situation. In order to earn greater acceptance, I had to conform to conventional ideas about the issues to which I would speak and the perspectives I would bring as a student. Yet in doing so I denied myself the opportunity to earn warrant of voice by drawing on and articulating my non-student theoretical and empirical knowledge of issues relating to ‘quality’, or the perspectives students and

lecturers had on student feedback. When I did claim warrant as expert this served to *disrupt* convention hierarchies and power relations. At times this created confusion and ambiguity and at others earned only temporary audience.

Acceptance was conditional on judgements of warrant, whilst the ability to earn warrant depended on the degree to which I was already accepted as an 'equal'. The experience of power dynamics generated through social conventions and social structures, despite formal or rhetorical 'appearances' to the contrary, made it clear that my formal position as 'equal' member with 'equal' rights to democratic participation might, in practice, be a form of 'repressive tolerance', or at least a contradiction in terms.

I remained largely anonymous within the group of academics that I met over the 3 years. Concerned to tread a difficult line between assertiveness and passivity, I had taken care not to 'stand out' within a group. Yet at the end of 3 years one senior academic told me that I had been 'recognised' as a valuable member of the group. I wondered whether I had apparently earned respect for any constructive contributions I *had* made, or because I *had not* proven to be a difficult, categorical student.

Analysis of empirical data suggested that students also perform to what they perceive as the norms and expectations of an academic culture. Within the interviews, students appeared anxious not to 'stand out' from their peers, or make themselves known for reason of being 'difficult' or 'demanding'. Drawing on my experience it seemed fair to conclude that whilst students did not want to stand out, they place themselves in a

paradoxical situation: academic distinction is earned only by proving themselves to be original free-thinkers who manage to 'mark' themselves out from the crowd.

2.3.1.3. Conversations

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that a researcher should treat the conversations they have about the research topic as formal data.

What am I studying? Conversations I had with other students and lecturers about the focus of my PhD ranged from incredulity at the 'mundane tedium' of my research topic, to hope for the potential outcome that I might 'put a stop to it', and to endless conversations concerning techniques and methods of student feedback.

Assumptions about what I am studying: Conversations with others who researched student feedback often led to misunderstandings. These appeared to derive from an assumption that the focus of my work *must* be technical in focus, or concerned with the examination of a particular method. I interpreted both misunderstanding and assumption as a reflection of contemporary concern with the development and management of technical systems, procedures and mechanisms of student feedback. I also imagined that the immediate and narrow conceptualisation of student feedback might relate to the lack of a critical research literature of student feedback.

2.3.2 The value of subjective experience: *merely* folklore?

Heron (1996) argues that experiential knowledge is active, intentional, and built on participative articulation and engagement. Moreover, a researcher furthers *propositional* knowledge *through* experiential knowledge.

The sketches given above suggest that my experiences external to the formal research are a rich resource. Certainly my participation with others, in dialogue, practical application and in different formal and informal situations, has meant that my experiential knowledge has furthered my understanding of the meaning of student feedback.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) caution that conversations *about* the research should not be brought to bear on the research as *theory*, but should be treated as subject matter for investigation. They argue that when researchers incorporate ‘common-sense’ knowledge and anecdote into the research as if it has the status of formal theory, research outcomes lose credibility they are merely based on, and reflect folklore.

My own experiences and conversations connect with many aspects of my research. They have status within this study as prompts that informed, furthered and supported explorations and questioning of formal theory, of student feedback literatures, and of theories emerging through data analysis. Insights gained through experience stimulated self-confidence about my decisions to conduct particular lines of inquiry.

I consider the lessons drawn from the 'folklore' of my experience to have status similar to that of both empirical and theoretical 'data'; 'folklore' is merely a different *sort* of knowledge to draw on, and another resource at work within and generative of my 'critical sensitivity'. Moreover, a conversation partner may be lying about their views concerning student feedback, but the lie is predicated on the possibility of plausibility.

What is folklore? When a tale or anecdotal folkloric 'episode' is told and retold, it reflects, reproduces and reveals many 'taken for granted' and culturally commonplace beliefs, structures and meanings at work in society. Folklore explains and maintains the ideological structure and value basis of a society, and has value in those terms for the 'folk'. It is a social 'glue' that reflects and provides common sense logic and explanation about the nature of a social context. Yet folklore can also be used, and can go unrecognised, as a means to control citizens or members of groups and institutions; it should not be overlooked as benign or mistaken myth and hearsay. Folklore is a resource for, and requires critical investigation.

It is precisely the 'folklore' qualities of my experiences as insider-researcher that I needed to examine. These are stories generated by, and revealing of structures, conventions, norms and relations within academic contexts. The characteristics of the academic context inform interactions and relations between academics and students. I experienced these personally, they were raised as substantive issues in research

interviews, they are present as dynamics within the interviews, they can be traced in transcripts, and they are a focus for sections of this study.

2.3.3 An analytical perspective on my experiences.

This experiential gain was not intended or anticipated, and yet my experiences within higher education have had impact on my research. The insights and questions are not a hoped for end-point and result, but a serendipitous effect of a process undergone.

Nevertheless, at *this* present end-point I am able (and more able) to reflect back on and make sense of them. The value of my experience derives from the choices I made, the processes I pursued, and the opportunities I took; whilst unpredetermined, they were all routes to greater understanding

Whilst external to the research, the experiences were pertinent to the practice, politics, context and concept of student feedback and relevant to my research. The need to understand these experiences was motivated by, but also informed, my attempts to understand the personal, teaching-learning, institutional and policy contexts for student feedback. This process also enabled a degree of self-reflexive criticism. I was called to understand my own reactions to a given situation, to examine the assumptions and beliefs on which my surprise, confusion, frustration or annoyance may have been based. I experienced the dual requirement to neither place value on any understanding as a 'totalising account' (Stronach 1999:185), nor form a judgement based on unexamined values or interests. This developed and progressed my ability to interrogate the theories

emerging from analysis and the knowledge resources that constitute my 'critical sensitivity'.

From student, practitioner or co-participant perspectives I was clearly able to see what was *not* functioning or being achieved by procedures and systems of student-participation in decision making and quality assurance. I also began to understand more fully the differences between theoretical explanations of problems with student feedback, and the insights offered by students and lecturers.

2.3.4 Self-criticism

Given this exploration of the significance of personal biography to the development of the research, it is necessary to give some explanation of evident flaws in the study in respect of the lack of documentation of these experiences and developing thoughts. I kept neither log nor journal, and did not record or document incidents and thoughts in any systematic manner.

At the outset of the 3 years of research and experience external to the research, it was not clear to me that either I or the research would benefit in the above ways. I did not intend to be so involved with student-representation, and had not intended to engage in ethnographic-type research: I was prepared for neither situation.

It can be levelled that I should have prepared to keep notes and journals both as good research practice, or because of the imaginative and creative nature of qualitative research - a quality that implies thoughts and inspirations are uncontrolled and unpredictable. It is also clear that I could possibly have made more of my experiences as a student and student representative in the form of collaborative research with students.

Had I accomplished any of these methods of recording non-interview data, I would have been able to use it now as an extra means of illustrating and explaining my argument within this study.

A remedy: Stronach (1999:187) argues that, just as a character in a stage play is performed by an actor, so too an argument, or in this case a research study, implies an author who sits behind the writing. He argues that the general preference is to 'offer a self-effacing front that prefers the impersonality of a disciplinary warrant'. In contrast to this assumed convention, I use the first person singular to discuss and argue the meaning of student feedback. By so doing, I both acknowledge my presence, but also distance myself from temptation to claim a 'totalising account'. I remind the reader that this study presents arguments that are grounded in my empirical work and encompass substantial amounts of my own personal biographical work and learning.

The use of 'I' also creates 'space' between myself and the writing. Rather than creating or acknowledging a monophonic text, the 'I' makes my 'voice' distinct from, and allows for others'. The use of 'I' is salient and prompts self-reflexive thought. This is

important owing to my position as the experience-rich researcher and most powerful agent. I am in the privileged position of being party to a wide range of information, data and experience; the account I offer will necessarily be a distilled version. Any process of distillation implies choices of what to include and what to exclude: the tale the reader hears is necessarily a partial account.

ⁱ There are three points to make about why I have restricted analysis of government/statutory texts to this time period:

1) The 1987 White Paper represents a marked shift in the relations between higher education institutions, their funding agencies and the government, and is a clear indication of the political and ideological nature of government interpretations of higher education. It is also the culmination of work since the Jarratt Report of 1985, that was undertaken by and on behalf of the CVCP to review ways in which institutions might a) manage themselves more efficiently and b) render managerial systems more transparent.

2) The fieldwork, and the major analysis of the data and literature was undertaken late 1995 - early 1997. This was prior to the election of a new government May 1997 and the reviews of post-compulsory education and the political response to these in the summer of that year.

3) The nature of higher education reviews and policy since 1997 is beyond the scope of this study, as is the extent to which they signal new conditions and contexts for higher education. However significant aspects of these developments, such as the introduction of fees for university tuition and the inception of the Quality Assurance Agency's new framework for 'quality' - are taken up retrospectively and only where they relate to some of the study's conclusions. This is done in order to question and appraise the conclusions of a study based on work completed mainly prior to these events, to make them relevant to contemporary debates and in part to shed light on those debates.

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER THREE

Researching Research Methods: The Case of Student Feedback

Introduction

This chapter examines research into methods of student feedback. It assesses this field of research in terms of the proportion of attention paid to different methods. It examines research into these different methods in terms of the methodological principles which underpin both the respective method and the research enquiry itself. Analysis is structured around two questions: what are the aims and motivations for research into a particular method of student feedback?; and how is the use of a particular method appraised, recommended and justified to the audience for the research?

The chapter thus provides examination of the relation between the interests and assumptions that ground each method, and the form/content of knowledge about students' views that is generated through the use of each method. The character of the research field as a whole is both shaped and fragmented by a set of dominant epistemological beliefs; these are compatible with the ideological assumptions and interests of the government policy agenda. The chapter discusses the relationship between the method that forms the dominant area of research interest and the policy context for student feedback.

First I characterise the nature of the research field, and explain the focus of my own review of the various literatures that constitute it. Second, I discuss in brief the historical and contemporary influence of one iconic figure on research into student feedback; his research interest lies with the method that forms the dominant area of research literature, the student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ)ⁱ. Third, and fourth, discussion focuses on the aims, interests and motivations of research into particular methods of student feedback, and examines if and how the literature appraises, explains, and justifies the research method to the reader. Part Three focuses on research into the SEQ; Part Four focuses on research into alternatives to the SEQ. The chapter concludes with an argument concerning the status of these literatures *as* a ‘research field’, the dominance of a specific epistemological paradigm, and the extent to which this is reflected in, and compatible with the principles and interests of contemporary higher education policy.

3.1. The structure of the field and the focus of my review.

The structure of the field: My work on student feedback began with a literature search on ‘student feedback’, as explained in Chapter Two, Section One. In this chapter I discuss the literature that focuses on research into student feedback methods. Of the range of methods subject to study and discussion, the SEQ formed the major area of interest.

Interests in the student evaluation questionnaire: The student evaluation questionnaire is 'by far the most commonly used method of obtaining feedback' (Husbands and Fosh 1993:191, Cloudier 1998:185 on Silver 1992:12). The SEQ is also 'the most thoroughly studied of all forms of personnel evaluation, and one of the best in terms of being supported by empirical research' (Marsh 1987:369). The research literature in this area is 'voluminous' (K. Feldman 1996:1) and 'enormous' (Wachtel 1998:191).

During my initial literature searches I examined three reviews of research into the SEQ: two from an Australian researcher (Marsh 1984, 1987) and one from an American (K. A. Feldman 1996). These reviews claim a degree of globality within defined interests in the field of research, and examine both specific research studies and other reviews of the field. The reviews focus on the work of the most prominent researchers in the field: PC Abrami, LM Aleamoni, JA Brandenburg (the earliest US 'pioneer'), WE Cashin, JA Centra, PA Cohen, WJ McKeachie, M Scriven and P Seldin.

The influence of US and Australian research: For historical reasons, American research is central to both the international and UK research base. In the USA, 'student ratings' have been used by management to appraise the work of teaching 'faculty' for promotion, tenure and payment since the beginning of the 20th Century; later their use extended to enable and guide students' choice of course (Wachtel 1998). The American research base also frequently cites the work of an Australian researcher, HW

Marsh; he is both influential in that field and within UK based research. Examples of his conclusions, and of the use of his work are given in part two of this chapter.

Global scope: Many research articles published in the UK come from researchers outwith America, Australia or the UK; yet the global literature derives both theoretical and methodological understandings from research conducted in the USA and Australia. Below I illustrate the interests of this global field; all the research studies cited make use of and focus on, the SEQ.

In **Spain**, Fernandez and Mateo (1993) focused on the significance of context, and have developed and researched the application of the Academic Setting Evaluation Questionnaire. In **Cameroon**, the use of a teaching evaluation questionnaire was examined by Amin (1994) in order to establish the ways in which students' ratings differed according to gender. Johannessen et al. (1997) used a questionnaire to explore dimensions of teaching which were of particular importance to students; they based their research on the **Norwegian** concept of teaching practice, in which teacher-student relations are emphasised. Arubayi (1987) conducted a questionnaire investigation into the perceptions and satisfaction levels of final year students, as a response to increasing pressures within **Nigeria** for practices of accountability. Nevo and Sfez (1985) conducted 'evaluation questionnaire' research on **Israeli** students' reactions to psychometric entrance examinations. Two researchers from **Hong Kong** and **Philippines** established the validity of 'two American instruments designed to assess

tertiary students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness with 77 Filipino undergraduates' (Watkins and Gerong 1992:727).

The utility of this field to my own research: Initial inquiry into the motivations, interests and assumptions of research into the SEQ identified that comprehensive analysis of that literature would be unfruitful to the progression of this study. The use of the SEQ, and the context for/focus of the American research into that method differ from uses and research in Australia and the UK; moreover my own interests lay with the concept of student feedback in general, rather than with a single method in particular. The initial inquiry did however provide insight into the epistemological assumptions of, and questions raised by, the work that informs the development and application of the SEQ. This work is often cited to justify and implement the use of this method within UK universities. The literature reviewed in this present chapter is selected to illustrate, rather than represent or summate the nature of this research area.

3.2. Herbert Marsh

It is generally agreed amongst Marsh's peers in America and Australia that two reviews (Marsh 1984, 1987) represent a 'careful, critical and reflective' overview, that reaches 'tempered conclusions' (K. Feldman 1996:2) concerning the reliability, validity and utility of student evaluations. Feldman's use of 'critical implies detailed analysis of the research field; this is yet internally focused such that the methodological principles of the SEQ approach are not subject to critique.

Marsh takes a generally positive position on his own scale of equivocation over student ratings. The most frequent reference or citation found in UK research is taken from the abstracts and conclusions of these two reviews.

Research described in this article demonstrates that student ratings are clearly multidimensional, quite reliable, reasonably valid, relatively uncontaminated by many variables often seen as sources of bias, and are seen to be useful by students, faculty, and administrators. However the same findings also demonstrate that student ratings may have some halo effect, have at least some unreliability, have only modest agreement with some criteria of effective teaching, are probably affected by some potential sources of bias and are viewed with some scepticism by faculty as a basis for personnel decisions (Marsh 1987:369; also cited in Feldman 1996:2).

The earlier review adds:

In future research a construct validation approach should be used in which it is recognised that effective teaching and students' evaluations designed to reflect it are multi-faceted, that there is no single criterion of effective teaching, and that tentative interpretations of relations with validity criteria and with potential biases must be scrutinised in different contexts and examine multiple criteria of effective teaching (Marsh 1984:707).

References and citations to these abstracts and conclusions are however selective, or not holistically representative of Marsh's work. The selective use of Marsh's work is in evidence, for example, in Ramsden (1991) and Richardson (1994), Richardson (1997), Stringer and Finlay (1993), and Timpson and Andrew (1997). Researchers tend to cite or make reference to Marsh's positive conclusions and omit the other, rather more cautious views. Marsh's caution centres on the extent to which the SEQ is designed and used with levels of context-specific sophistication, and with the problematic nature of studies of 'bias'. In contrast, and as rare exception, Shannon et al (1996) reference research that questions the effectiveness and impact of student evaluations, and use Marsh (1987) in support of their own investigation. References to Marsh within research reports are used to explain, justify and operationalise the particular research inquiry. Yet select referencing and citation, or an imbalanced representation of Marsh's research findings lends false impression of his support for the SEQ.

Some of the concepts and categories for which Ramsden claims firm evidence and clear agreement are contested and variously defined from *within* as well as *outside* the arena of research into the SEQ. Contention often reflects the use of the SEQ for purposes that Marsh cautions against; an example of this would be a summative evaluation of teaching that has potential personal, pecuniary or employment-related consequences. Scriven (1981) offers a scathing account of the assumption that the SEQ method is a valid or justifiable means of evaluating teaching, and gives ethical, epistemological and educational reasons for his view.

3.3. Research into the Student Evaluation Questionnaire.

3.3.1 Motivations, aims and interests of the research.

This section cites from various research articles to illustrate the range of issues that motivate research into the SEQ; beginning with the conclusions that Marsh reaches in answer to the same question.

HW Marsh: Marsh (1984:707) sets out four reasons for the use of students' evaluations of teaching:

- a) diagnostic feedback to faculty about the effectiveness of their teaching;
- b) a measure of teaching effectiveness to be used in tenure/promotion decisions;
- c) information for students to use in the selection of courses and instructors; and
- d) an outcome on a process description for research or teaching'

'Quality and accountability': A large number of studies are motivated by the issues of 'quality' and 'accountability'; these examine the SEQ in terms of the demands and implications of government higher education policy or institutional policy. Research is rarely critical of the policy agenda; instead, it positions itself as a practical response to the exigencies of that agenda.

Students' Evaluations of Teaching in Higher Education: experiences from four

European countries and some implications of the practice

ABSTRACT: Mechanisms for the quality assessment of teaching in the higher education systems of the UK, The Netherlands, France and Germany give varying status to students' assessment of teaching, specifically that done by means of questionnaires (Husbands and Fosh 1993: 95)

The Development, Validation and Application of the Course Experience

Questionnaire

Abstract: The ... CEQ ... is used as a measure of perceived teaching quality in degree programmes in national annual surveys of all graduates in the Australian higher education system and is increasingly being employed as a measure of the quality of teaching in universities in the UK.

Introduction

The widespread demands from both governments and consumers for greater accountability in higher education have been widely documented. These in conjunction with the quality improvement movement, have resulted in a need for valid, reliable and comparable performance data on teaching quality. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden 1991) was designed as a performance indicator of teaching effectiveness, at the level of whole course of degree, in higher education institutions (Wilson, Lizzio and Ramsden 1997: 33).

Stringer and Finlay (1993) focus on the development of a version of the SEQ that is suited to the need to evaluate 'quality' within their own faculty. Within a broad sweep

literature review they identify that the SEQ addresses the need to respond to external pressures on institutions; these pressures are identified by (McInnis et al 1998) as managerial efficiency and efficacy, 'quality', funding mechanisms and accountability.

Management: Husbands and Fosh (1993) argue that concern over the student evaluation questionnaire has contemporary relevance owing to the link, through concepts and practices of 'quality assurance', between student evaluation and managerial interests. Managerial uses revolve around planning, public relations and the creation of a distinctive institutional image. The SEQ might also be used by managers as a lever of internal control on academic staff; Husbands (1998) argues that student evaluations are represented as a '360-degree quality management' technique, but 'in reality students' assessments often become the material for a cheap, rough-and-ready form of downward or managerial assessment ... in performance review and promotion procedures' (Husbands 1998:118).

Defining quality - securing satisfaction, image and recruitment: The Quality in Higher Education Project aimed to develop a methodology for assessing 'quality' in higher education in response to government policy (c.f. Harvey 1992). Harvey interprets policy as a demand for greater accountability and performance in higher education in respect of the needs of both 'stakeholders' and the economy. He also argues that 'quality enhancement' and 'quality management' are also vital questions for

institutions to address, given the pressures presented by expansion, resource restriction and the changes necessitated by the demands and consequences of policy.

Given this context, he argues that the assessment of 'quality' necessitates the identification of what constitutes 'quality' in higher education in the view of internal and external 'stakeholder' groups:

whilst sports facilities and environment might be of some consequence for prospective students and significant when it comes to student satisfaction, they are regarded as relatively unimportant quality criteria by staff and students (p.111).

In his view student evaluation can be used both as performance indicator (1992:56, 62) and means of 'empowering' students in terms compatible with 'consumer' charters, surveys and pressure group activities (Harvey 1992:99-100). The SEQ is a performance indicator because it can be used to generate quantifiable measures of students' views on their experiences. Likewise, both Richardson (1997) and Rowley (1996) argue that the SEQ is useful in respect of generating information about students' 'satisfaction' levels such that this can be used by management to secure recruitment and institutional reputation. Stringer & Finlay (1993), McInnis (1998) and Husbands & Fosh (1993) note that use of the SEQ signals to students that their views *are* listened to. They claim that this will assist with recruitment strategies because students will communicate such institutional 'care' to other potential students.

Credibility of student (rankings): Husbands (1998) makes reference to Bonnetti (1994) as one of the few in the UK to identify and define the 'correct' nature of 'bias' in students' evaluations of teaching and teachers. Similar concerns have agitated Husbands before (Husbands and Fosh 1993, Husbands 1996). His main worry derives from his view that the concept of bias is little examined, or misconstrued, within UK research on the SEQ. His research interest is to use statistical analyses that establish the nature and extent of bias in SEQ results, such that criteria used in evaluations of teaching can be refined accordingly.

Research into 'bias' is motivated by the ethics of using the SEQ for assessment of 'quality' in higher education, particularly in respect of the evaluation of an individual's teaching. 'Bias' is conceptualised as a question of statistical validity and reliability; it is also a concept that implies doubt concerning students' capacity to judge teaching. For example, Bonnetti (1994:57-8) argues that questionnaires are a flawed method of comparative assessments because:

it is rather simple to demonstrate from experiential evidence that students are not measuring their teachers against some absolute measuring stick of excellence or merit competence which they complete a course questionnaire ... students learn what is good or creditworthy primarily by experience of observation rather than by introspection. The second [problem] deals with maturity and fineness of judgement. One of the luxuries of youth is extremeness of thought and action. Student questionnaires are not exception. Thus among some part of the population

sample there is a tendency, after ranking various teachers, to regard the best as brilliant and the worst as dreadful.

Measurement of Teaching: Richardson (1994, 1997) and Ramsden (Ramsden 1989, 1991, Wilson et al 1997) focus on the outcomes of their respective research on the Course Experience Questionnaire [CEQ]. They intend to establish its suitability to provide ‘a measure of perceived teaching quality’ in Australia, or for ‘measuring the quality of teaching’ in the UK (Wilson et al. 1997:33). Patrick and Smart (1998: 165) examine the SEQ in order ‘to clarify the nature of teacher effectiveness and develop a measure for evaluating teacher effectiveness’, motivated both by an Australian government policy document that states, ‘the goal of higher educational institutions is to achieve quality outcomes’, and by research into students’ learning, that ‘shows that learning outcomes are influenced by the learning environment involving a number of interrelated components such as teaching method and assessment, course structure, curriculum, and teacher effectiveness’. They conducted preliminary qualitative surveys concerning the important criteria of teaching, and combined these results with ‘quantitative items from two of the most widely used measures of effective teaching in Australia’ (p.171), one of which was Ramsden’s CEQ.

Husbands (1998:118) notes that ‘numerous institutions of higher education in the UK have formalised students’ assessment of teaching and some have indeed incorporated the results of this exercise into summative processes such as promotion and/or formative ones such as appraisal’. He locates the SEQ as a managerial/consumer model of personnel appraisal, where gathering the views of managers, peers, internal and

external customers, project leaders and 'subordinates' is 'downward assessment by proxy'. His intention was to develop closer knowledge of 'factors correlating with teachers' competence, in order that they 'be used properly, especially in managerial assessments and appraisals of teachers' competence' (p.117).

Performance Indicators: Rowley (1995) makes a similar connection between student evaluation and performance indicators (PIs). She disputes that student evaluation results are adequate to serve as an indicator of teaching performance. The difficulties involve: defining teaching; establishing a constant 'standard' of student-expectation against which to draw judgement of student evaluation results; the nature of students' understanding of and response to both learning and evaluation - phenomena that lead to biases; poor sophistication in the methodological design and application of the SEQ; and a lack of differentiation between methods in respect of the exact purposes intended.

Ramsden (1991) was initially cautious, and yet later makes assertive claims about the outcomes of his research into the use of the CEQ as a performance indicator: the results 'confirm the validity and usefulness of the CEQ as a performance indicator of university teaching 'quality'' (Wilson et al. 1997:33).

Mantz Yorke directed research on behalf of the HEQC (HEQC 1996c) to develop student evaluation for use 'by institutions' as one from a set of 'indicators of programme quality within their quality assurance frameworks' (p.v). Yorke takes stock of the literature on PIs and their use in higher education. He refutes Ramsden's own

claims about the CEQ (Ramsden 1991) by arguing that a single instrument cannot serve as a comprehensive PI. Yorke is concerned with the development of a more useful instrument of performance assessment.

Yorke suggests that *both* government and students had been pushing for a 'consumer' voice in higher education, and cites as evidence for this the publication of Student Charters by the National Union of Students (HEQC 1996c:6 and 10). He also argues that research into PIs was necessitated by the demand for comparative assessment of institutions, and by the emphasis placed on performance data in approaches to institutional management. He points out that consumer, comparative and managerial assessments imply different forms of evaluation practice (HEQC1996c:1), and criticises existing practices with PIs on the basis of a lack of 'shared understanding' of what is needed at both 'macro' and 'micro' levels (p.2-3).

He undertook his research on behalf of the HEQC. The work derives from an original CNAA project that focused on PIs in the context of 'course quality assurance and control', in respect of obtaining information about the 'quality' of the student experience that could be used as a measure of 'satisfaction'. The CNAA project had selected a 'questionnaire-based approach to staff and student perceptions' because this method provided information in the form of standardised 'data'. He explains that such data facilitates comparison and longitudinal institutional performance and can be summarised for audiences 'distant' from the course programme.

His work for the HEQC drew on the original findings and the work of Ramsden.

Yorke, like Harvey (1992), understood his own approach to encompass a *broad* concept of the student experience. From Yorke's perspective, the approach was broad because the questionnaire included criteria concerning student support services as well as the teaching and learning situations.

Policy interests and statutory assessments: Richardson (1994, 1997) cites several further uses for the CEQ: he argues that it is an appropriate means to assess 'graduateness', the 'student experience', and the effects on students' learning of the introduction of generic skills training; it is a means to create a minimum baseline standard of teaching competence, and to construct and validate external inspections of 'teaching quality'. He recommends further research in this latter respect, for reasons of the low cost of the CEQ and because:

On the face of it the scales of the CEQ do seem to be related to the criteria being used by the UK Funding Councils in assessments of teaching quality. In that case, the CEQ may well have an important part to play in the development of a methodology for the assessment of teaching in higher education (Richardson 1997:43).

Approaches to study, the CEQ and assessments of institutional performance:

Lublin and Prosser (1994) locate their work within the Australian policy context, in which quality management and quality assurance were emphasised, in which a premium was placed on performance in respect of educational outcomes, and in which institutions were obliged to reach a definition of 'good teaching' and 'to monitor, evaluate and work towards improving what they do' (p.41). The creation of national discretionary funds for the development of good teaching, meant that 'good teaching now had some explicit rewards and with it went the gradual move to procedures to formalise the evaluation of teaching for individual and department purposes' (p.42). In this context, the evaluation of teaching had changed from sporadic practice 'to something routinely done by a department as part of the monitoring and review processes which are now becoming institutionalised ...in response to accountability and quality assurance pressures' (p.42).

De Winter Hebron (1984) offers a 'cultural translation' of evaluations used in America, these focus on 'behavioural' or 'objective' characteristics of an individual lecturer's teaching. Bennett et al (1995) describe their own multi-purpose, easy to implement and simplified version of the CEQ. In their view, these features are advantages, as is the possibility of producing data that is available to 'rapid computer analysis and documentation'. Timpson and Andrew (1997) also chart the development of an alternative to the CEQ. A combination of 'two new instruments', Teaching Feedback and Subject Evaluation and the Approaches to Study Questionnaire does 'much more to promote continuous instructional improvements, [and the] approach described here may be suitable for other campuses seeking similar changes' (p.55).

the ASQ has been extensively validated on a wide variety of student groups in different systems of higher education. It provides direct information about the approaches to learning that are adopted by students ... and it might therefore constitute a valuable adjunct to more conventional forms of student evaluation.

Conclusion to 3.3.1: Much of this research is concerned with the development of methods of student feedback that are applicable beyond one teaching and learning context. The SEQ is one such instrument. Research claims that: it can be used across different local and institutional contexts; it produces information of use for consumer-oriented and marketing purposes; and it produces performance information of use both to internal management and external quality agencies.

1. In sum, the SEQ is of interest because it can be used to measure:
 - the 'quality' of teaching for the purpose of institutional management;
 - the 'quality' of teaching for the purpose of national accountability exercises;
 - the 'quality' of teaching at course/departamental level;
 - the 'quality' of courses for local course development purposes;
 - the student experience for the purpose of institutional management; and
 - the student experience for the purpose of national accountability exercises.

2. Researchers also suggest that the SEQ might be extended to:
 - measure ‘graduateness’;
 - measure the impact of generic/transferable skills components within the curriculum;
 - to establish and/or monitor a baseline standard of student expectations of teaching quality’;
 - to inform the instruments and criteria of external quality assessment.
3. Researchers have suggested further spin-off benefits of the use of the SEQ. These accrue to the institution through improved internal and external relations with students.
4. The SEQ is researched and developed in terms of its application as a performance indicator to compare and monitor performance at, and for interested parties at, departmental, institutional and national levels.
5. The idea of the SEQ is informed by concepts of ‘satisfaction’, the consumer, marketing and inter-institutional competition. Harvey (1995) and Harvey and Knight’s later work (1996) associates the SEQ with ideas of democratic participation and empowerment; here however the emphasis is on individualistic consumption, or ‘satisfaction’ (also see Green et al 1994).
6. Research in discrete areas, such as students’ ‘approaches to study’, also implicates and informs work on the development of the SEQ.

7. The SEQ is a method of obtaining information from a wide group of people that can be summated, aggregated and used by interested parties at local, institutional and national levels. The status and concept of the SEQ differs according to each different research interest in its development and application. Yet in each case the method remains constant: the SEQ is a standardised quantitative questionnaire that produces data available to interpretation by others 'at a distance' from the teaching-learning activities of individuals, departments and institutions.

3.3.2 Methodological justifications and caution concerning the suitability of the SEQ method.

Research into the SEQ can also be examined for the extent to which the use of the SEQ method is critiqued, explained and justified.

Internal methodological interests, Marsh: Marsh adopts a 'construct validation' approach to SEQ design. This emphasises how conclusions concerning the meaning of SEQ results can only be tentative hypotheses and must be tested against other variables and in precise relation to the exact contextual circumstances of teacher, students place and time etc. He emphasises the need to observe how:

- a) teaching is multi-faceted;
- b) there is no single effective criterion of teaching;
- c) results require analysis against a set of hypothetical multiple relations between the given 'dimensions' or 'variables' of teaching;

- d) the relation between variables of students' ratings and the dimensions and variables of effective teaching is complex;
- e) results should be analysed on a weighted basis, according to what is known about the relative significance of the relations between variables.
- f) a 'bias' is only a 'bias' if it strongly affects the rankings and is *unrelated* to the constructs of effective teaching. (see Marsh 1984: 708-9)

To measure the 'quality' of teaching for institutional management: Lublin and Prosser (1994:43) examine the use of the SEQ within their own institutional policy framework for a developmental approach to evaluating teaching. The policy is informed by Ramsden's perspective on 'good teaching'ⁱⁱ; they argue that this 'encourages high 'quality' student learning, it discourages the superficial approach to learning and encourages active engagement in the subject matter'.

They base their research on prior work with the 'Approaches to Study Questionnaire' [ASQ] that they claim 'has shown that students adopt qualitatively different approaches to their studies depending on their prior experiences of studying and the particular context in which they find themselves. These different approaches lead to qualitatively different learning outcomes'(p. 38).

They establish a parallel between this theory of student learning and the evaluation of teaching to claim that 'institutional policies and practices of student evaluation of teaching would be expected to have substantial effects on the way staff approach their

teaching and structure the teaching and learning context (p.40). Thus it becomes necessary to 'have a form of student evaluation of teaching consistent with the [developmental aims of] policy' (p. 43).

To measure the 'quality' of teaching to meet demands of national accountability:

Ramsden (1991) locates his work within the context of political demands for public accountability. He interprets public accountability as an *idea* that links higher education to economic growth and as a *practice* that necessitates 'public types of evaluation, including the use of numerical measures of research and teaching outputs and the performance appraisal of individual members of academics staff' (p.129).

Richardson, whose work draws heavily on that of Ramsden, explains how 'the CEQ was explicitly developed to provide a means by which national funding agencies or other stakeholders could monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching across different institutions of higher education' (p.42). Ramsden (1991) describes PIs as 'authoritative quantitative measures of key attributes of the institutions and their component units'(p.129). He *assumes* that PIs are adequate means of providing institutional managers with informative and accurate measures of institutional performance. Implicit to this view is that PIs also provide meaningful descriptors of institutional work, such as teaching. He states:

There is a widely held belief that teaching 'quality' is a many-sided yet ultimately elusive phenomenon. This conviction has led several commentators to doubt

whether an unambiguous scale of measurement suitable as a PI could ever be devised. ...This conclusion seems altogether too pessimistic. ... It is important to realise that research from different but related standpoints has produced similar results. Although 'good teaching' is undoubtedly a complicated matter, there is a substantial measure of agreement among these empirical studies about its essential characteristics (p.131).

The CEQ was also oriented to five 'key specification criteria'. These reflect and derive from:

- a theory of 'all the important aspects of the quality of teaching and curriculum';
- a theory of students' capabilities and interests;
- scientific definitions of reliability and validity;
- the idea of correlation between student learning and teaching;
- politically governed requirements for applicability that demand and assume a level of nation-wide standardisation between institutions, courses, teaching, and students
- politically governed requirements for applicability that demand and assume that measures remain meaningful at several layers of aggregation (extracted from p.133).

Richardson (1994) cites Marsh (1987) as research evidence that provides 'authoritative' legitimation for the use of the SEQ for personnel decisions, for student selection of courses and for the study of teaching. The use of the SEQ is not problematised, but justified in respect of the policy context. The SEQ is of value 'from the perspective of an institution of higher education seeking to maintain and improve teaching quality'. His references to Marsh and Ramsden are assumed sufficient legitimation for his own

research interest in transposing Ramsden's CEQ to a British setting (Richardson 1997).

To measure the 'quality' of teaching at course/departmental level: Patrick and Smart's work was designed to test the 'construct validity' of the questionnaire (Patrick and Smart 1998). They criticise existing SEQs and argue that these are based merely on researchers' hunches about, rather than students' actual beliefs about effective teaching. They used qualitative methods to generate information for testing by quantitative methods 'in order to develop a stable instrument for measuring teacher effectiveness ... It is expected that [through the use of this instrument] the whole teacher effectiveness domain will be captured and that a number of existing teacher effectiveness dimensions will be confirmed, thus enhancing content validity' (p.169).

To evaluate the 'quality' of courses for local formative purposes: Timpson and Andrews (1997:58) assert that 'ultimately, the responsibility for designing credible instruments and mechanisms for soliciting feedback about teaching and learning, and then nurturing improvements, rests with campus leaders, in consultation with the teaching staff'. Their research into the validation of the TEVAL form of SEQ is part of their work on the development of a 'suite' of different types of questionnaire 'instruments'. This represents a portfolio approach to professional 'reflective' development that acknowledges academics' different needs for evaluative information. This approach allows evaluation data used for appraisal to be separated from that used by individuals and course teams for self-development and development of courses.

Stringer and Finlay (1993) offer an atypical amount of discussion about different methodological approaches. They aimed to encourage systematic use of SEQ results drawn from students from across their own particular faculty, such that course development meets with agreed standards. These considerations presuppose the use of a standard SEQ. Nevertheless they were already predisposed to this method: their interests were to establish 'evidence in favour of using student evaluations' and of 'their reliability, validity and usefulness' (p.97).

They define reliability as contingent on the aggregation of data collected from a large group; they assert that informal, unsolicited student evaluation might not be as useful as formal methods, because such comment may not be representative. They define validity as contingent on the identification of the correct criteria of effective teaching and on the elimination of bias effects. They assert that bias effects relate to:

- students' characteristics, experience and ability;
- the characteristics of the course and class size;
- the time available and timing of evaluation; and
- the extent to which students are honest.

To measure the student experience for institutional management: Harvey (1992) argues that there is no single *definition* of quality. In the light of this he lists a range of *perspectives* on quality. He explains these perspectives in respect of their different implications for 'quality' assessment and management, and in respect of the idea that each perspective implies separate and distinct criteria for judging 'quality'. The

additional difficulty is that whilst these criteria will vary over time, it is also possible that 'we may catch ourselves switching from one perspective to another without being conscious of any conflict'(p.25).

His project is, he says, a 'pragmatic' response to these problems. It reflects the need to take 'responsibility for maintaining and enhancing quality', and 'determines a set of criteria that reflect common-sense aspects of quality and then seeks out convenient measures by which to quantify quality (p.25). Thus it appears that his definition of 'quality' is contingent on the criteria that are 'convenient' to measure.

In the report he identifies 26 'common sense' criteria from a total of 111, and concludes that these represent the 'total student experience' and 'transcend discipline area, sector, institution or type of respondent' (p101). He suggests that the results of his survey might form a good basis for determining criteria that would be both valid and important to assess in external comparisons of the 'quality' of higher education institutions.

To measure the student experience for the purpose of national accountability:

Yorke's interests in the SEQ approach to the measurement of student satisfaction (1996) were evidently governed by his own perspective that 'most of the straws in this uncertain wind seem to be blowing in much the same direction' (HEQC:1996c:19).

It will be useful to note the development of his research (p.1-19). The research was, he says, informed by commonalities between the form of data that the SEQ generates and the form of data both required by the CVCP and also compatible with government policy interests in the generation of documented information for the purposes of quality audit and assessment. The CVCP required 'specific, 'quantifiable' and 'standardised' PI data suited to both inter-institutional comparison and the management of institution-specific objectives. Audit and assessment necessitated PIs that would facilitate inter-institutional comparison on the basis of economy and efficiency.

He considered that the emphasis of audit and assessment had led to the development of narrow sets of PIs that served only as 'proxy' indicators of the 'student experience'. Thus his own research intended to, 'devote the bulk of its attention to matters of process as experienced by students and staff, rather than to inputs, outputs and aspects of institutional efficiency' (HEQC 1996c:21 original emphases). Yorke's own research was designed, first, to reflect all these 'straws in the wind'.

Yorke had additional interests in designing and validating a SEQ such that it would ameliorate the problems of existing PIs. These evidenced 'slender interest in getting at the heart of the institution's provision of learning (and other) experiences for students' (HEQC 1996c:19). Although forceful, his critique is not focused on the restrictions of the methodological principles of the PI approach to performance assessment. It is focused on the extent to which PIs have been developed in accordance with managerial rather than student-oriented interests.

Yorke considers the adoption of qualitative approaches to student evaluation as a potential means of redressing the balance away from indicators focused on 'economy' and 'efficiency. Yet his remit was to design a method that would be universally applicable across as many students as possible, that would be cheap, and that would generate information that could be subjected to trend analysis in order to identify the effect of action taken as a result of a feedback cycle. 'Given these decisions, it was clear that the heart of the project would be student evaluation. There was a range of approaches available, ... of these, a questionnaire approach seemed most likely to give rise to indicator data that could be used across time, and perhaps across programmes, ... [and to give rise] to information potentially available for use at different institutional levels'. He warns however that 'as information rose through an institution's organisational strata, the meaning it conveyed would be likely to be attenuated with increasing distance from its point of origin (HEQC 1996c:22).

He argues that the choice of the questionnaire 'merely reflects the particular priorities identified for the present project' (HEQC 1996c:22). However the use of data for internal purposes 'mirrors, in microcosmic form, their use for external purposes. In addition, PIs are also used for 'externally driven comparisons ... for purposes relating to accountability and the allocation of funds. Given this presage for the project, and given the theoretical basis of the performance indicator as:

an authoritative measure - usually in quantitative form, - of an attribute of the activity of a higher education institution. The measure may be ordinal or cardinal, absolute or comparative. It thus includes both the mechanical applications of

formulae ... and such informal and subjective procedures as peer evaluations or reputational rankings (Cave et al 1991:24 cited in HEQC 1996c:1),

it seems likely that the 'straws' blowing in the direction of the questionnaire were caught in a gale, rather than an 'uncertain wind'.

Inward focus: The questions raised by Marsh within his review are limited to the questionnaire itself. They are products of, and are governed by, the paradigmatic frame of reference. He reviews 136 articles - a tiny fraction of the mass available; and many of these are further reviews. This reflects a spiral of inwardly focused interests. It also suggests that the SEQ is highly problematic in terms of its use in the evaluation of a complex human and social activity, such as teaching-learning: the complexity and contention that is inevitable in this area becomes a technical problem and stimulus for exponential growth in the research literature.

Bannister (1981:191-5) sheds some light on this:

A developed psychological theory should have clear and extended implications for research method. ... Most extant psychological theorising has little to say about research method. At best it simply delineates areas of research. Thus major theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalytic theory or learning theory ... point to particular phenomena which are central ... but the design of research in these fields

derives not from the theory, but from a mimicry of what are thought to be standard scientific procedures. ... Standard volumes on experimental design in psychology are essentially statistical textbooks, devoid of ideas about sources of inventiveness, modes of inquiry or ways of interrogating assumptions. They merely present mathematical frames for experimental ventures and the frames they offer are so devoid of psychological implication that we have been able to fill them with the barren antics of navigationally puzzled rats or the mechanics of a standard questionnaire without the question of psychological relevance intruding.

The exponential growth might then be understood as both reflection and product of self-interested experiments on methods and techniques that ignore their own 'psychological implications'. Puzzles cannot be solved through the application of the same logic to a situation already obtained by that logic. Bannister's argument about the 'gross impoverishment of thought about research design in psychology' draws on ideas of reflexivity. From a reflexive point of view, psychologists would be 'trying to make sense out of the way in which their subjects make sense ... Personal experience is not more a subjective, chaotic, anecdotal nonsense in relation to science than it is in relation to life (p.191).

Internal justification: The problem with the dominant research paradigm is that it is based on fundamental assumptions, prejudices even, about the subjects and objects of inquiry. Research questions arise for reason of these assumptions, rather than for reason of the nature of teaching-learning, students and lecturers. Husband's research on

bias (Husbands and Fosh 1993, Husbands 1996, 1998) appears legitimate from within that paradigm, and is appropriate, given the uses to which the SEQ is put. However Husband's concern might be wrongly focused, at the same time it draws on and reproduces the idea that subjective interpretations and other influences on the SEQ results are in fact negative or value-free forms of data. The implications of a method that disallows reflexivity induces the requirement for 'controls' to be built into the questionnaires and statistical analyses:

Curiously, psychologists are most likely to acknowledge the humanity of their subjects when they begin to fear that, subjects are somehow tricking and confusing them. Hence the rush to embed 'lie scales' into questionnaires ... [and] the vast maelstrom of deception experiments (Bannister 1981:195).

Reflexive actions contain meaning. They are meaningful in terms of the reaction to a method, and lend insight into the student's perceptions and understandings of both the institution and their own experience at university.

Bias: The use of a method for controversial purposes, when it is already a subject of dispute and equivocation within its research field, backfires on students as they are targeted as the source of failures or become suspect witnesses. They come to be considered unsuited, unreliable, and not sufficiently competent or expert to reach judgement on the teaching that they receive. This is a major motivation for an enormous amount of research; it often includes an interest in allaying the fears of lecturing staff (e.g. Marsh, Overall and Kesler 1979; Newport 1996; Renner and

Greenwood 1985). However the implication of this way of thinking conflicts with educational values such as respect and concern for the student's point of view and the development of the student's ability to come to understand their perceptions and experiences. Students might not be *as* experienced or *as* knowledgeable about theories of evaluation or teaching in comparison with academics. However concern with the validity of results lies first with methodological principles and second with the political purposes they serve.

The meanings of bias: Statistical definitions of 'bias' differ from common cultural understandings. Within non-mathematical discourse 'bias' is an idea of personal intent or ideological presupposition, a prejudice, even. 'Bias' appears in research literature, has currency in staff development literature and is prevalent within debate concerning the general worth of questionnaires, owing to the problems relating to the statistical definition of 'bias'. However 'bias' is used in ways that infer the set of negative social meanings and associations:

Students don't like filling in lots of long questionnaires and return rates can be very low without good organisation and a bit of cunning. The last 10 minutes of a lecture slot, and handing in on the way out, seems to be a favoured method of administration. "Please drop it into the Departmental Office as soon as possible" doesn't seem to work at all (Gibbs and Haigh 1985:5).

Whilst at an institutional level there is strong support for the use of questionnaires, individual members of staff are sceptical about student attitudes. 'Students are not particularly interested in the questionnaires and find them boring'. 'Students take a relaxed view and about a third cannot be bothered to fill in the questionnaires.' Staff closely involved in work on student questionnaires believe that students are reluctant to give time (Bull 1990:32).

observations over the period of evaluation would seem to cast doubt on students' abilities and motives in providing feedback for course evaluation. The effectiveness, efficiency and timeliness of their approaches, and, in some cases, even their motivation, integrity and openness can still be questioned (Paul 1991).

Thus 'bias' conflates with suspicions of students' 'competence' and combines with pejorative associations implied by the ideas of the 'lazy', 'malcontent' or 'activist' (Husbands 1998) student. This generates a situation where the ills of results, or the ills of low-return rates, are explained away in terms of the assumed disposition of the student. This situation avoids, rather than prompts recognition of, or reflection on why 'bias' accrues in either form. Furthermore, it does not prompt examination of the potential conflict between non reflexive method, non-reflexive analyses and a highly reflexive object (teaching and learning), reflexively engaged subjects (students and lecturers), reflexive and inter-subjective experience (coming to understand in general and subject-learning in particular).

What is required perhaps, is a critique of the suitability of the SEQ method, and a reassessment of the reasons why students respond to questionnaires as they do. This might extend understanding beyond that of the assumption that low returns reflect 'questionnaire fatigue', students' apathy in respect of an activity that is of no instrumental benefit to them (e.g. Richardson 1997), or students' malicious intent.

The context for policy as justification for the use of the SEQ: Much of the literature uses the context of government policy as justification for their own research interests into the SEQ to legitimate the use of the SEQ. Policy asserts a need for explicit management, places restrictions on resources, induces rapidly changing conditions on and demands for higher education, introduces inter-institutional competition for funds and students, and introduces external assessments and audits of both academic performance and management performance. Whilst these constraints generate a need for management information, government policy also posits a concept of management which places high value on documented information and systematised, standardised procedures. Given these factors, it is understandable that there is interest in developing a method of student feedback that generates information in a form compatible with the requirements of performance indicators. Yet whilst the *context* for the use of this particular method might justify its development and use, the research does not explain, justify or legitimate the method, or its own interests in that method in terms of the relation and fit of the SEQ with the nature of teaching, learning, 'experience' and 'satisfaction'. Instead, the SEQ is presented as a pragmatic response to the exigencies of the general context in which the requirement for research into the SEQ or SEQ-type

results is derived. Justifications are reduced to this, and to practical questions of time, cost, or the purposes of management.

Whilst Yorke *aims* to 'get at the heart' of the *process* of the *experience*, the contextual motivations and constraints, combined with the interests of the body for whom the research was undertaken led him to adopt a method that appears to conflict with his intentions. Yorke describes the problems students had with 'averaging' the range of perceptions and feelings they have concerning even just one dimension of their experience and the difficulties they had in defining their experience in terms of a single and discrete dimensions. Whilst he recommends subsequent dialogue with students on the basis of student evaluation (PI) results, it is clear from this that the information gained at this very preliminary stage might indeed miss the 'heart' of the matter.

The rich, fleeting, perplexing, personal-relational basis of 'meaning', and both the process *and* experience of teaching and learning necessitates methods that enable expression and interpretation of what lies 'at the heart' for an individual:

[I am] aware neither word nor measure can stand for the complexity of experience, I speak out against indicators that use the simple to stand for the complex ... I see them as neglect of subtle concerns, seldom toward better understanding (Stake 1997: 50).

The research paradigm: Within this (dominant) research field, the conceptualisation of research problems such that these fit with the methodological demands of the SEQ necessitates that the concepts to be explored via questionnaire, such as teaching, learning, 'quality' or 'experience' are defined in terms of discrete criteria and dimensions. Whilst the SEQ might involve numerical rankings, it might also involve words or even pictures (see below). Yet the implications of the method mean that both words and pictures are subject to analysis on the basis of content, rather than meaning value, in order that they may be categorised and quantified, aggregated and subjected to tests of validity and reliability via statistical formulae.

Whether a result of government intent, managerial need or the methodological constraints of the research paradigm, demands for statistical data presuppose the availability and possibility of defining teaching, learning, 'quality', satisfaction and 'experience' in terms of discrete and measurable dimensions, categories, relations and variables.

Concepts, perceptions and experiences are neither necessarily discrete or material phenomena, nor have definite and determinate relation with other phenomena.

It lasts but a short while, that awareness of quality. We may remember it long, with feeling, but we experience it briefly, unsubstantially. ... Quality is so seldom rooted in firm ground, with meanings we can count on, with standards we are sure of. We are of two minds, of many minds. We change. ... That we once stolidly presumed to be there to be measured, to be observed, to be of merit, seems, at some times

there only in the evanescence of our beholding (Stake 1997:41-2; emphasis in the original).

The objectification into explicitly defined categories/ dimensions/ criteria of experiential, perceptual and social processes like teaching and learning, or of inevitably value-based judgements such as those of 'quality' is a reductionist process. It also places value only on what is both possible to 'capture' as a dimension. Thus all that is non-material, non-objectifiable or unrelated to a stable 'cause' is eliminated from the enquiry. Indeed, human subjectivity and reflexivity within research are subjected to controls as devalued 'meaning' and 'bias'. Yet attenuated perspectives and understandings of complex concepts gain currency through their use in discourse, and are reproduced through that use. Thus complex phenomena and practices are rehearsed and understood *as* attenuated, mechanical concepts; these concepts reflect only the fragments that were possible to categorise.

Research into the SEQ reflects and reinforces two assumptions. First, that the most frequent scores within a large population sample are also the most meaningful to the individuals concerned. Second, that meanings are adequately captured and expressed by numerical scores. There are two implications of this. First that the significant scores inform what is then assumed most significant within the student's experience of teaching, learning or higher education. Second, that 'average' scores generate a concept of the generic student with predictable and generalisable preferences, beliefs and interests.

Dichotomies and dualisms: My reading of the research literature of student evaluation suggests the dominance of a scientific paradigm congruent with and enabled by government policies. Simultaneously, research mobilises a dichotomous approach to qualitative and quantitative research that rehearses a positivist/non-positivist dualism. When qualitative work is set up as part of a dichotomy, it becomes the 'cute school' of discovery, description and theory building, as opposed to the 'brute school' which involves tests of hypotheses and generalisations (Van Maanen 1998:xii). The dichotomy and dualism are outdatedⁱⁱⁱ and misconstrued (Ashworth 1997a, Atkinson and Hammersley 1998). Qualitative research is not the guarantor of a non-positivist approach, and neither is quantitative research necessarily the hallmark of positivism. The dominant, positivist, scientific paradigm promotes itself at the expense of an opposition that is merely a construct of the same argument.

the problem here seems to be the familiar one of essentializing differences into dichotomies and then privileging one side of a dichotomy over the other (Van Maanen 1998:xiv).

Justifications of research into, and debate concerning the SEQ rehearses dualisms and dichotomies. Each takes sides, and belongs to one half of the quantitative/qualitative divide:

- large sample / small sample;
- statistical sample / ad hoc sample;
- representative = reliable / small number = unreliable;
- reliable = useful / non-reliable = not useful;

- based on theory = valid / based on practice = not valid;
- tested = valid / amateur practices of a lone lecturer = not valid;
- hard / soft
- objective / subjective;
- numerical / discursive;
- statistical analysis / interpretative analysis;
- value-free / value-laden;
- questionnaire = quick / qualitative methods = slow;
- questionnaire = easy to analyse/qualitative analysis = lengthy difficult process.

The left hand side of the listed dualisms represent the assumptions of research that fits within the dominant methodological paradigm. Within justifications of the choice of the SEQ, those within the right hand side are criticised, discussed as doubtful, and are devalued. This criticism is, however, only possible when constructed within an opposing discourse - in opposition to the left hand side.

3.4. Motivations, aims and interests of research into alternative methods

In comparison to the quantity of research into the SEQ, published research into alternatives is scarce. This section combines analysis of any given justification for research into and use of these alternative methods into its analysis of the motivations, aims and interests of each piece of research.

Images of feelings about the experience of a course of study: McKenzie et al (1998)

were interested in developing a method of student feedback that would assist with course evaluation and development. They note that,

the evaluation of educational programmes is a complex and difficult process. All authoritative texts on evaluation note that there is no single best method of evaluation. They also say that within any evaluation, a variety of sources and methods should be employed to maximise the chances of considering the influences or contributions from the many factors associated with the educational process (p.153).

They refer to a wide range of alternative methods, such as group discussion, interviewing and student diaries, and explain how the suitability of a particular method of evaluation depends on the context for the research. They note that these techniques are based on the use of spoken or written words, and claim this to be a consequence [a] of the recent rise in research concerns with validity, reliability and utility, and [b] a consequential 'perceived need to make evaluations as authoritative, objective and uncontentious as possible' (p.154). Their own approach derives from developments in research into 'images' as a mode of communication and a rebuttal of the criticism that images are merely a form of private expression. They claim that their own approach to be innovative. The team took a view that 'traditional methods of course evaluation are fragmentary, seeking feedback on particular dimensions of teaching or courses'. They

were interested in trialling an 'holistic approach, which allows students to express more global feelings about their course experience' (p.153 my emphases).

The method involved asking students to illustrate their experiences through self-portraits, cartoons, metaphorical images and diagrams. The meanings of images are not private to the individual - they are not solipsistic but are communicable expressively to a wide audience. Analysis of the results includes, and gives rise to discussions with students about the meanings. The researchers conclude that images are more powerful than text and 'in some ways it is easier to respond to a drawing than it is to some form of numerical graded response' (p.162). They argue that the drawings were comprehensible, and provided a diverse range of insights, generating information that did not typically accrue from questionnaires.

Discussion and consensus building: Wisdom (1995) argues that there is no best method of conducting the activity 'which is often called student evaluation, sometimes student feedback, monitoring or appraisal, frequently student assessment ... and student consultation' (Wisdom 1995:84). The latter term describes his own 'snowball' process of group-dialogue based evaluation. He claims that the method *can* be used by management to monitor student opinion of teaching 'quality' whilst still being of use to lecturers for formative self-development.

The method was designed to avoid the perceived disadvantages of the questionnaire, and to capture the benefits of ideas drawn from theories of the reflective-practitioner

and the practice of student/lecturer representation committees. The former disadvantages are data that is difficult to interpret and translate into action, and power relations that result from academics' control over the process. The benefits of his approach derive from the time that is made available for students to consider and debate their thoughts, and from the inclusion of processes that foster 'the skills and understanding that come from rigorous reflection and the development of self-understanding' (p.82).

Participant and collaborative research on student evaluation methods: Gibbs and Haigh (1983) offer an edited collection of seminar papers that originate from the self-development activities of lecturing staff at Oxford Polytechnic. These papers include semi-structured interview, diary, video, tape-recording, non-teacher or teaching focused questions, formative reflection processes, and collaboration on the part of course teams. The publication dates of this collection predates evaluation for current concerns with 'quality' and they should be seen in the light of HMI/CNAA inspections that promoted and required the evaluation of courses for formative purposes.

Haigh claims that the seminars themselves were 'consciousness raising exercises', designed to promote the status of evaluation, to subvert hierarchy and factional rivalry, and to cross disciplinary boundaries (Gibbs and Haigh 1983:1). He sees the work as a pragmatic attempt to bridge the gap between theory of evaluation and its practice. This he considers a consequence of texts written in distant language about concerns unrelated to the individual lecturer. He also notes how in the 'folk-lore', course evaluation is

spoken of as managerial scrutiny or merely the obsessions of the 'professional educational theorist':

If teachers are to shed natural reluctance to fish in the muddied waters of questioning their personal professional competence and success, these teachers must then feel that they are in control of the instrument of self-examination. Such confidence is not easily imposed from outside. It is something which is better developed slowly, gently, individually and internally (p.2).

Action research with students: McDowell (1991) led and edited reports of work undertaken by 10 course-based teams of lecturers from 4 UK polytechnics, who wanted to develop their own teaching practice. The research was funded by the CNAAs as a case study of practitioner development that utilised students' opinions for the improvement of both teaching and courses.

McDowell argues that case study approach was appropriate because 'a number of inter-related and contextual concerns are important when it comes to incorporating the student view into course evaluation', and these require integration and examination in relation to context. The case study research followed cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. She considers the report to be a 'time slice' of the total activity and insight gained over the research (p.2-3).

The compendium of research reports constitutes collaborative research with, rather than about the lecturers, that was designed first, to stress 'learning, mainly in the sense of the course team learning by listening to what students were able to tell them about their experiences', and second, to counter the conception of student evaluation as 'a complaints department model [or] the form-filling model' (p. 6).

Lomax (1985) also undertook an approach to student feedback 'in which taking action is integral, that is, one in which the adoption of desirable change is built into the process of evaluation ... [and is] designed to motivate participants to improve their practice, the practice being teaching for tutors, learning for students and managing for course leaders' (p.254). Here the stress is again on learning, yet Lomax is concerned that all involved with the evaluation process benefit from it, including the students. The students benefit because they develop understanding of the rationale for course requirements and also a greater reflective capacity.

The method is also useful, she says, because whilst being easy to implement it also produces evidence of an evaluation process for formal scrutiny, generates data for course managers, and provides for staff development in that there is evidence of a growth in their confidence in teaching. Finally, change is self-generating because it is structured into the process and is thus a condition of that process.

Comparisons of questionnaires and group discussions: Tiberius et al (1987:287) conducted research 'to determine whether the assumed advantages of interactive

techniques over questionnaires could be substantiated'. They observed a lack of evidence to demonstrate that discussion methods of student feedback overcame the disadvantages of the SEQ. They note the wide use of the questionnaire, but argue, on behalf of unnamed critics, that the questionnaire obtains information that is restrictive, self-determined and bland, whilst also an activity conducted in isolation rather than discussion with peer students.

They found that the difference in the value and impact of the results could be attributed to the process, rather than the substantive outcomes of the two methods. Although the discussion mode generated particular and themed information that ranged less widely than that obtained via questionnaire, the researchers noted that the discursive information - obtained via a report on a discussion made by an external facilitator - was more coherent, creative, emotive and critical than that generated by questionnaires. This, in turn, led the lecturers involved in the study to prefer the written report of student evaluation discussion over the quantitative/qualitative results obtained via questionnaire.

Conclusions to part 3.4: The research articles range over a large time period; the latest have direct concerns with teaching quality. However in each case, research into a method is interested in the educational, rather than managerial benefits. The aims of the research into particular methods is motivated by questions and issues tied to, and originating in particular contexts; the method is designed and researched in relation to the demands of that context. The method is not researched in order that it might have

widespread application. The research design, and the methodological premises of the method are not assumed self-evident or justified. Indeed, explanation of the theoretical premises of the method, and their educative rationale appears central to the message of the research, rather than the initial platform upon which research is legitimated and justified. The main conclusions that might be derived from this analysis are summarised below:

Motivations: Research is undertaken for reason of:

- staff development;
- a concern for the negative limitations of the questionnaire;
- a reworking of this concern into a set of research questions concerning power relations, students' emotions and the holistic experience of higher education;
- the difficulty of communicating meaning through written word or numerical indicators; and
- an acknowledgement that the process of student feedback is central to, and as important as the eventual outcomes.

There is some evidence that this research is prompted by the general issues of 'quality' enhancement and monitoring, as with McKenzie and Lomax. Nevertheless, that these are not central or common motives or objectives suggests that research into alternative methods is prompted by the concerns of educational practitioners and the lecturers themselves; they reflect and constitute an interest in professional self-development or staff development, rather than the development of instruments that facilitate managerial scrutiny.

The vast majority of the literature identified on alternatives to questionnaires is not published as empirical research within journals, but as one off reports by in-house publishers, and staff development or other higher education agencies. Whilst this might not be significant as an assessment of the credibility and value of the material, it does suggest that outside the field of educational psychology and the SEQ, student feedback does not have high status as an arena of empirical research. It also suggests that the work is of low market value; what is of high market value is literature that helps individuals and institutions cope with, rather than challenge or find educational solutions to, the demands presented by government policy.

Theoretical justifications: The methods of student feedback are grounded in and justified by reference to educational, social or developmental aims. These alternative methods of evaluation demonstrate a level of 'educational implication', and also harness an educative element into the evaluation process. As a consequence, the research into the particular method is often similar to the student feedback method under examination because both are conceptualised as processes of learning.

In contrast, the completion of a SEQ is not a formative activity, and research into the SEQ's potential within the evaluation of teaching-learning is conducted through processes that do not mirror the classroom activity. The design and implementation of the SEQ becomes a matter for technical experts. In order to engage in these alternative methods, the lecturer does not require expertise in questionnaire design, only a degree of educational insight and confidence; these are also potential objectives for the

generation of student feedback. Developing expertise in *alternative* student feedback methods is complementary to the development of educational practice.

Learning whilst researching, learning from the researchers: Methods such as participant, collaborative and action research are designed to emphasise the learning, about teaching and learning, that accrues to the lecturers as they research evaluation methods. There are three tensions. First, as noted by Gibbs and McDowell, these other ‘voices’ do not typically participate or appear in the writing of the report. Second, whilst these reports highlight the learning of the course team, only the reports by Wisdom and Lomax placed emphasis on the learning that accrues to the *student* participants. Third, Lomax’s research was the only ‘holistic’ approach where action on teaching and learning was explicitly built into the process, rather than left to follow the process.

Variety: It is clear that there are many alternative methods available. Many of the researchers assert the limitations of a using only a single approach, and note the danger that interpretations based on summary statistics may be mistaken. Neither the idea that there are alternatives to the SEQ, nor the idea that multiple methods are preferable is emphasised or even commented upon with any degree of frequency in the research literature concerned with the SEQ.

Feelings and expression of meaning: The communication process from students to lecturers is aided when lecturers are able to recognise and interpret an 'emotive' feel to the evaluation comments, and when the process facilitates sharing of meanings and messages. Thus the process of evaluation is augmented by dialogue about either the practical teaching-learning task or the evaluative activity undergone. Moreover,

If social programs are meaningful, if they are of high quality, it is importantly because of participants' lived experiences in them. To exclude such experiences from our conceptualisations of program quality is to radically under-represent important dimensions of quality ... [Standards for programme quality are] irreducibly pluralistic, are not meaningfully presented as objective, permanent assessments of a fixed reality, but rather must capture the inter-subjective, dynamic, dialogic potential of both the judge and that which is judged (Greene 1999:164-5).

3.5. Conclusions

3.5.1. The character and status of the 'field' of student feedback research

Research into student feedback methods is dominated by the 'voluminous' work on the SEQ. Within the UK this work is also motivated and coloured by the context of contemporary higher education policy and the demands of quality management, audit and assessment. Relative to the size of this work, the remainder of the research field is both marginal and of low status. The majority of work focuses on the benefits of

particular methods to managers. There are a few studies (Rutherford, 1987, Gregory 1991) that examine lecturers' feelings and opinions of student feedback; here research conceptualises student feedback as an instrument of staff appraisal. Discussion is skewed away from student feedback or different methods of student feedback, towards that wider frame of interests.

There is little work that examines, or raises the question of the benefits that accrue to students. Wachtel (1998) finds only four US studies that investigate students' perceptions of the student rating questionnaire. When the student perspective on student feedback is raised as a question within the research, it is usually in connection with uncovering the 'bias effects' of students difficulties or dislike for particular methods or quantities of methods. The issue of students' perceptions of student feedback is not conceptualised in respect of questions such as the value of the method within the student's experience or what it represents to them about their experience of a course or institution, or the feelings they have both during and after their engagement in that method.

The research is also published in a disparate range of sources; each has its own particular audience. Each literature is thus shaped according to the interests of its own audience; there are few cross-overs between these audiences aside from initial 'legitimizing' references to Marsh or a few of the other US researchers listed at the outset to this chapter. Research published by staff development agencies tends towards practical and technical solutions for institutions or hard-pressed individuals. Journal articles are published only in connection with, and as theoretical/technical responses to,

contemporary policy concerns with management and 'quality'. The 'enormous' field of research into the SEQ addresses the interests of, and is located within the methodological constraints of the scientific paradigm of educational psychology.

In the UK, there is little research into the impact of students evaluations, in respect of either management interests and goals, or the enhancement of teaching practices. A few Australian and US studies (Cohen 1980, Aleamoni 1987, Murray 1987, Marsh and Roche 1993) consider what lecturers do with the information that results from the use of the SEQ. Shannon et al (1996:42) report that student feedback has influence on teaching, provided that it is part of a range of evaluative information, and provided that staff 'sincerely desire' to develop their practice. They suggest also that staff respond more positively to peer review and when they have a degree of educational training. Baxter (1991) reports the benefits of the voluntary use of the SEQ by individual academic staff, where the questionnaire is designed in the context of, and specific to the lecturer's own teaching. Lecturers reported that they found the exercise moral-boosting, and that qualitative information was most useful. They feared that if use of the SEQ became mandatory, or was tied to purposes other than individual interests, this would generate angst amongst lecturers and doubts about the validity of the results.

3.5.2. Relationships between methods and demands of government policy

Stronach (1999:176-8) argues that 'the statistical machinery of comparisons and hierarchies' that characterises educational effectiveness discourses acts as an

‘anachronistic device’ or ‘ritual’. The hard core of assumptions is ‘rationally presumed rather than argued, but also acts simultaneously as a kind of ritual frame, so that frame and argument both support and invest each other, neither complete without the other and hence neither complete because of the other’. The ‘ritual’ provides rules which ‘define the universe of legitimate concepts’ and thus establishes a ‘proven order of legitimate comparisons’ that ‘rules out the idiosyncratically cultural and contextual’, and posits an ‘international frame of reference’.

The adoption of scientific, or ‘technical-rational’ approaches to student evaluation research meets the time/cost exigencies of local institutional contexts that are themselves outcomes of government policy. The research paradigm is compatible with the rules and requirements of the ‘ritual frame’ at the same time as the ‘frame’ provides legitimation for the research, and growth in research into technical concerns with methods. Similarly, student evaluation activity is a ‘cultural performance’ that realises and reinforces the ritual frame. Institutional practice, research interests and government policy demands develop in conjunction in in terms of a power relation. The political assertion that educational effectiveness is reliant on and demonstrated through a frame of ‘statistical machinery’ finds purchase in society, culture and economy because it fits with a popular and pervasive means-end, instrumental logic (Ashworth 1997b, 1998). Alternatives to this statistical machinery are devalued in terms of both political assertion and dominant social, educational and market values. Stronach’s ritual, the ‘statistical machinery of comparisons and hierarchies’, is also Habermas’ ‘dogma of the sciences’ belief in themselves’. Both dogma and performance find purchase in social and

economic contexts and are advanced by the operation of political power, values and interests.

3.5.3. The concept of student feedback

Validity and management: In the context of the published literature, student feedback is a research question in respect of concerns with validity, reliability and utility of student evaluation information as performance indicator. Interests also lie with the development of the 'standard' SEQ that provides information about courses, teaching or students' expectations and experiences such that the information enables both internal management and external comparative judgements.

Management tool: Student feedback is incorporated into institutional policy and is endorsed by management theory as:

- a tool of professional self-development;
- a means of team-based course development;

an expression of concern for the needs, expectations, satisfactions and democratic rights of students.

Vague: 'Student feedback' is also conceptualised in diffuse and vague terms:

- Student feedback implies evaluation that is both summative and formative.

- Evaluations are motivated by managerial rather than educational interests; student feedback is associated with contention over management, rather than educational issues.

Contention: Student feedback is an object of contention within areas of research interest, is a different practice depending on the particular area of research, and is the object of disgruntlement and disagreement within higher education for reason of its association with the government policy agenda.

Layered: The concept of student feedback reflects and promotes its contemporary context; it contains many layers of meaning - including notions that it is one or all of evaluation, questionnaire method, appraisal, management monitoring device, government imposed monitoring device, performance indicator, customer feedback exercise, tool of professional development, means of communication, and means of democratic decision making. Student feedback also contains layers of meaning that reflect the internal contradictions between these ideas, and the conflicting methodologies that they imply.

ⁱ Throughout the study I use the term 'SEQ' to refer to the student evaluation questionnaire method of student feedback. I use the term 'student feedback' as a generic expression; it identifies the phenomenon that this study seeks to reconceptualise. Within Section Two 'student feedback' is used to refer to, and encapsulate the set of ideas that students and lecturers associate with the idea of student feedback. The meaning of 'student feedback' thus includes a diverse range of issues, questions, conflicts, controversies and contradictions. The SEQ is merely one of these ideas.

ⁱⁱ Ramsden, P. Learning to Teach in Higher Education. London: Routledge, cited Lublin and Prosser (1994: 43).

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Maanen (1998) suggests that the practical activity of both qualitative and quantitative research share similar processes, by way of the nature of analysis, theoretical grounding and both guess-work, risk, imagination and reasoning.

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER FOUR

A Conceptual Analysis of Government Higher Education Policy: The Context for Student Feedback

Introduction

This chapter contains an analysis of trends and themes in government policy for the reform of higher education, as it has progressed since 1985. The analysis provides a conceptual overview of the policy agenda and focuses on the ideological assumptions and political intentions that underpin the various discursive, structural and technical strategies used to legitimate and implement reform. The chapter thus provides critical perspectives on the political context in which student feedback is located, in which it is a tool, and of which it is a symbol.

This chapter, together with Chapter Five, forms an argument that explains and justifies the structure and focus of Section Two of this study, in which I discuss and appraise my analysis of empirical data.

The chapter argues that the overriding policy agenda was to enhance the 'performance' of higher education institutions. This was driven by perceived needs to reduce total costs to the public purse of higher education, and to increase returns on public investment. Within this, the 'performance' of higher education is conceptualised in terms of measurable outputs, and is valued in terms of its relevance to commerce and

industry. An often conflicting and contradictory hybrid of both market and bureaucratic-rational management ideologies inform and legitimate the means and ends of the reform agenda. Concepts of 'efficiency' and 'accountability' are emphasised within both ideological strands. Various discourses, structures and technologies of 'efficiency' and 'accountability' are tools through which to enhance the 'performance' of higher education. The introduction of these discourses, structures and technologies are attempts to gain greater political and external leverage and control over the higher education system, universities, the academic professionals and the process and outcomes of academic work. They identify the aim of re-orientating and redefining the concept and purpose of higher education.

First I examine how higher education policy fits within a wider agenda for the reform of the public sector and its organisations. Second, I analyse higher education policy in terms of the concepts of 'efficiency', 'accountability' and 'performance', to identify what these concepts mean and what they intend. I argue from a critical perspective to appraise the implications of these concepts for the higher education system, universities, the academic professionals and the process and outcomes of academic work. Third I draw on various critiques of the policy agenda; these suggest that the assumptions, interests and ambitions of reform predicate a changed relationship between higher education and society, and that respective analyses of the imperatives and consequences of this change are inevitably value-driven. These, and my own critique prompt questions about the responsibilities of the academic profession in respect of their engagement with the debate, process and direction of change. Fourth, and in contrast, it might also be argued that the tools and intentions of the policy agenda have

consequences that render critical engagement by the academic profession in these issues difficult to stimulate or mobilise. The chapter concludes that the policy agenda is both internally contradictory, and generates conditions such that internal changes within institutions, and changes to the relationship between higher education and society, are likely to be fragmentary, confused and contentious. At the same time, they are also likely to be grounded on a lack of critical conceptualisation and understanding.

4.1. A wider context of reform

The management of public sector institutions has been a focus for increased government interest across westernised societies since the 1970s. Within the UK, governments have targeted different sections of the public sector with the assertion that both bureaucratic-technical and market derived forms of management are the key to greater levels of 'performance'.

The overriding strategy was,

an essentially managerial ideology of reform, ... characterised by a general belief in the efficacy of organisational structure and management training as a means of producing better management in the public sector; better management career structures were seen as the answer to the problem, almost irrespective of what the problem was (Harrison et. al. 1990:77).

A managerial ideology holds that increased, conspicuous and more potent management leads to improved performance at all levels of the organisation. Concepts of the character of effective management changed from a belief in 'rational positivism and scientific management, which translated into a set of organisational imperatives that stressed centralised planning and bureaucratic control ... towards a rationale for change in which the need for a much more decentralised market-oriented service provision, subject to much tighter managerial control at the point of delivery, became the overriding theme' (Reed & Anthony 1993:187-9). In this latter respect, an emphasis on enterprise, on commitment to organisation and work, on competition, on competitiveness and on consumer satisfaction, service and responsiveness was assumed to effect cost containment and a more dynamic, output and productivity-oriented work culture.

Du Gay and Salaman (1992:622) argue that market derived reform strategies have led to a 're-imagination' of public services and their users, such that the public sector has,

become permeated by the language of enterprise. Enterprise has remorselessly re-conceptualised and remodelled everything in its path. Ostensibly different spheres of existence have fallen prey to its 'totalising' and 'individualising' economic rationality - the nation finds itself translated. 'Patients', 'parents', 'passengers' and 'pupils' are all re-imagined as 'customers'.

Research into the impact of policy on public sector organisations, professionals and work suggests that this has been diverse, piecemeal and often contradictory (Clarke and

Newman 1997, Ferlie et al 1996, Kirkpatrick & Martinez-Lucio 1995, Pollitt 1993).

Responses to managerialism in the public sector identify a process of mediation, negotiation, compromise and resistance; this distorts policy intentions and generates a dialectic pressure for successive policy change:

shifts are enacted in practice and in ways that are not the direct outcome of the grand plans of policy makers and politicians. The contradictions, inconsistencies and incompleteness of the macro-level changes create the conditions for and resources with which individuals turn managerialism into lived practice. ... Rather than a smooth, coherent and linear process the restructuring of the state has been characterised by successive change initiatives, some of which have been designed to correct 'failures' of implementation in earlier reforms (Clarke and Newman 1997:105).

However within this work, minimal research attention has been paid to what is happening in higher education (Deem 1998) despite substantial public and academic debate and controversy about the nature, purpose and implications of higher education reforms.

4.2. Higher Education Reform

4.2.1 Efficiency

Efficiency as bureaucratic-rationality: In 1984 the CVCP came under pressure through the University Grants Committee to make arrangements to reduce inefficiencies of traditional modes of work and organisation in the university:

in the universities, tradition and inertia often work against change'; 'every university should examine its machinery of government, to ensure that its decision-making processes are effective (UGC 1984, quoted in Dearlove 1998:65).

The UGC alleged that 'loose' (McNay 1995) structures and processes of collegiate decision-making, and the norms, cultures and practices which these reflect and sustain were 'irrational' (Avis 1996) and 'wasteful' (Trow 1993). In response, the CVCP launched an enquiry that aimed to 'promote and co-ordinate a series of efficiency studies of the management of universities' (cited in Dearlove 1998:65). The Committee (Jarratt 1985) reported that 'it is in planning and the use of resources that universities have the greatest opportunity to improve their efficiency and effectiveness' (cited in Dearlove op.cit.).

The Jarratt Committee acted both in response to government pressures and in order to ward off feared government intervention. The committee arrived at a set of recommendations that were conceptualised and implemented in the form of 'hard'

managerial techniques (Trow 1993). The Committee claimed that efficiency would be improved through the introduction of scientific and bureaucratic-rational frames of management and by empowering administrators in decision-making, planning and resource allocation. It was assumed that the use of statistical and information-based institutional performance measures would enable objective, rational, transparent and systematic management. This assumedly value-free and de-politicised form of management would, in contrast to the 'partial' nature of collegial decision making, appear more legitimate and, as a consequence, would empower managers and managerial decisions.

Bureaucratic-rational management involves the formalisation, standardisation and simplification of tasks and routines, the specialisation of roles, and hierarchically imposed objective and target setting. The production of information 'provides management both with a technology and a 'rational' justification for exerting increased bureaucratic control'. This is key to gaining control over professional groups: it erodes restrictive practices, or, 'the ability of occupational groups to use their expert knowledge base to mystify, or create an aura of indeterminacy, which precludes managerial or user involvement' (Davies and Kirkpatrick 1995: 92-3). It obtains for management the capacity to define the frame, process and goals of professional work: measures of performance defined against select criteria provide a focus for professionals and their work because the measures become the means to legitimise work outputs and professional status.

The paradox of the Jarratt Committee's conclusions was that these sought to avoid government intervention whilst introducing a form of management that was compatible with political ideology and interests, and has enabled increasingly overt and explicit control of the academic profession and its work.

Efficiency as 'more for less': The re-election of the Conservative Government in 1987 inspired it with greater confidence to expand the scope and speed of public sector reform (Pollitt 1993). The publication of the 1987 White Paper: Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (DES 1987) was accompanied by overtly ideological, value-laden and unproven (Moodie 1988, Peters 1992, Trow 1993) allegations about the insular, unresponsive and inefficient nature of higher education. The White Paper contained a definition of 'efficiency' that went beyond that of the Jarratt Committee. First, in the view of government, it was no longer sufficient to improve the efficiency of existing arrangements by reducing 'waste'. In addition to the publication of efficiency gains achieved, (DES 1987: 3.26), it was also considered necessary to produce more out of the system:

The pursuit of efficiency is not just about saving money. It is about helping institutions and individuals to achieve more of what they should achieve with the money that is available. ... Again, the Government has a role in seeking to ensure that suitable arrangements to promote and monitor efficiency are in place for institutions and for different parts of the whole system (DES 1987:3, 23).

Achieving efficiency of this kind both within institutions and across the higher education system necessitated structural and financial reform. The 1987 White Paper removed polytechnics from the control of Local Government, abolished the UGC, and reconstituted new funding committees for both the polytechnics and the universities. These included a greater number of non-academics, who were given the remit to award funds for research against a rank of performance indicators.

The formulaic means of awarding public funds in respect of annual increments and meeting deficits was thought no incentive for organisational effectiveness. Jarratt identified that this led to 'fragmentation', 'inadequate co-ordination' and 'little formal accountability' (quoted in Dearlove 1998:65). The 1987 White Paper advocated market derived financial incentives such as 'contracts', and encouraged entrepreneurial income generating activity. It was assumed that market based incentives and a competitive funding environment would stimulate tightened organisational control, the co-ordination of structures, processes and policy, and would achieve reduced costs and greater returns on public funds (Williams 1991). Greater efficiency would facilitate an increase of the ratio of students to unit of resource, and when supplemented by external income, would *substitute* for actual reductions in funding; institutions were forced to 'do more with less' (Trow 1996).

The image of an effective organisation became that of a university with the capacity to achieve and prove competitive powers, and to demonstrate financial and corporate viability. The image of the effective academic became that of highly committed corporate employee. The implicit imperative was that organisational and employee

objectives and values should change, merge, and focus on the pursuit of product excellence and consumer satisfaction.

'Efficiency' now translates as increased productivity and both organisational and financial rationalisation. The extended definition is compatible with the values, practices and structures derived from market driven organisational objectives and commercial forms of organisational control. Overt and explicit management becomes key to compensating for actual reductions in resources. Lack of financial viability, business 'rigour' and competitive value signals poor management, rather than inadequacies in public funding.

Efficiency as the economy: The third extension of the definition of 'efficiency' represented in the 1987 White Paper lies in the exhortation that higher education work become relevant to the national economic, industrial and commercial needs and wealth (DES 1987: para. 1.4-5; para. 2.10-13, "*Requirements for Highly Qualified Manpower*"; para. 3.21-22 "*Links with Industry*"). This demand mobilises an assumed link between educational, industrial and national economic success. It implies that students are thought of as inputs and outputs and that the student's role and interest in studying is instrumental: focused on maximising potential career and income levels. It implies that research is no longer viable as exploratory work towards unpredictable discoveries, but when its outputs are directly instrumental to economic needs.

Efforts to create competitive markets atomises institutions and pits them against each other in competition for available funds and relative image. Despite this, the White Paper refers to a national 'system' of higher education (DES 1987: para. Chapter IV: *Changes in Structure and National Planning for Higher Education*), and likens this 'system' to a national industry where individual institutions are productive units and provide, collectively, for national needs.

Conclusion: 'Efficiency' is cost-reduced and competitive production within institutional 'units'. It is the productivity of the higher education system, its institutions, and professional groups. It is defined as the extent to which higher education products match the ends of industry and commerce.

4.2.2 Accountability

The 1991 White Paper claimed that, 'the prime responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning rests with each individual institution. At the same time, there is a need for proper accountability for the substantial public funds invested in higher education. As part of this, students and employers need improved information about quality if the full benefit of increased competition is to be obtained' (DES 1991:24; my emphasis).

The following sections chart some of the ways in which policy strategies drew on and changed the meaning and value of 'proper' accountability.

The meaning and value of 'accountability': The concept of accountability has been used within government policy to justify, legitimate and implement the structures and technologies that seek external leverage and control over academic institutions and professionals. Over the course of policy development 'accountability' drew on, subsumed and modified the idea of 'democratic accountability'. The idea of democratic accountability changed from that of a social contract comprising organisational and professional responsibilities and obligations to the public in respect of probity in the conduct and management of institutions and in respect of the integrity and purposefulness of higher education provision. 'Accountability' was used to introduce a new 'public' contract; this involved market-defined relations between higher education and select beneficiary groups in society. The meaning of 'accountability' grew from general concerns with the efficient use of public resources to encompass a set of imperatives for the use of these funds: the state-institutional contract involved specification of the nature and outcomes of higher education provision. The contract was articulated and regulated through the work of statutory bodies that replaced previous self-regulated funding and monitoring arrangements; the contract is represented in structures and technologies of control that these bodies defined and introduced.

Structures of accountability: The University Grants Committee acted as a 'buffer' body between the chartered institutions and government; within the polytechnic sector the equivalent 'buffer' was the relevant Local Authority. These, alongside representative bodies and government departments, constituted the 'intermediary layer', through which government higher education policy decisions were considered and implemented (Becher and Kogan 1980, Becher 1987, Trow 1993, Salter and Tapper 1994, S. J. Ball 1994, Vidovich and Porter 1997).

The 1987 White Paper abolished the UGC and created the University Funding Committee (UFC); it removed polytechnics from Local Authority control and created the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Committee (PCFC). This structural change was extended in the 1991 White Paper by the abolition of the binary line, the UFC and the PCFC, and the creation of unified Higher Education Funding Councils (HCFCs). It enabled government to reconstitute and redefine the remit of the 'buffer' bodies. The HCFCs were charged with the obligation to 'assess the quality of what is actually provided [through the use of] ... quantifiable outcomes', including the use of performance indicators and calculations of added value, and through 'external judgements on the basis of direct observation of what is provided. This includes the quality of teaching and learning, its management and organisation, accommodation and equipment'. Assessments of quality 'should continue to inform the funding decisions of the new Funding Councils' (DES 1991:28-9).

The structural changes brought about a tighter relationship between institutions and the state, and greater levels of government influence within the 'intermediary layer'. The

changes mark an attempt at 'state centred closure' (Ozga 1990) over the process of policy formation and implementation.

In conjunction with these changes to the bodies charged with the allocation of public funds to institutions, the abolition of the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and the creation of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), also represents growth in the relative powers and responsibilities of the 'intermediary layer' vis a vis institutions, at the same time as these responsibilities were increasingly determined and directed by government:

The Government will discuss with representatives of the institutions the nature and development of such a quality audit unit. It will expect the unit's steering council to have industrial and professional as well as academic members, and to admit assessors from the Funding Councils to its meetings. It will expect the unit to publish reports on institutions and an annual report' (DES 1991:26).

The HEQC formed a new statutory body with a remit to audit the quality control arrangements that each institution had in place. It was announced that the HEQC would be owned, funded and operated by the institutions themselves (DES 1991:4), and argued that such arrangements would ensure that institutional autonomy and academic freedoms would not be breached.

However this assertion fails on a number of counts. First, institutions have the major, rather than complete stake; non-academic members are external influences, and the

Funding Councils themselves 'are quangos set up by Government whose members are appointed by the relevant Ministers' (Wagner 1993:282). Second, if system-wide scrutiny is to result in meaningful assessments about the relative and comparative adequacy of institutional quality control arrangements, this implies that there must be a set of criteria applicable to, and used across the set of institutions within the higher education system. Third, the efficacy of self-regulation is assumed to derive from 'the self interest which institutions will have in demonstrating that internal quality controls continue to be rigorous' (DES 1991:26). This idea implies that institutions will protect their 'self-interest' by proving themselves no worse than other institutions in terms of what must necessarily be, therefore, a coherent and universal set of criteria. The final contradiction lies in the statement that the 'Government intends to include reserve powers in the legislation to ensure the satisfactory establishment of the unit' (DES 1991:27). The idea of what constitutes 'satisfactory establishment' remains in-explicit and vague; yet, the idea of satisfaction implies the possibility of judgement. Judgements demand criteria and depend on a set of values and interests. At the same time, Government retains the powers of intervention in the event of dissatisfaction. Assertions of the need for reserve powers of intervention represent attempts to state the terms of the contract against which institutional organisation and work is assessed.

Markets and accountability: Johnes and Taylor (1990) argue that the change in nomenclature from *Grant* to *Funding* committee identifies a shift in the focus of the State-institution relationship. This implication is that institutions receive funding for specific services rendered, rather than for their general and public value. The structural

changes brought about in the 1991 White paper were informed, legitimated and implemented in part through the continued use of a market ideology and discourse. Pollitt (1993) argues that the change from the Thatcher to Major governments in 1990 marked attempts to further extend, reinvigorate and re-legitimise the status and role of a market ideology. Yet the 1991 White Paper also progresses the hybrid of market and bureaucratic-rational ideas of efficient organisation and control. Within the 1991 White Paper, the range of bureaucratic-rational structures and technologies were extended at the same time as the market discourse and the emphasis on management practices derived from the commercial and industrial sector were reinforced. Thus the 1991 White Paper assumed it significant, and continued efforts, to stimulate competitive and entrepreneurial behaviour in and between institutions. Structural changes sought to deregulate institutions by freeing them from obstructions to equal competition inherent to the division of nomenclature, different funding arrangements and varying levels of external curriculum controls.

It was argued that the publication of HEFC assessments of the quality of teaching provision in institutions would provide a new form of information for the 'consumers' of higher education: students and employers. Performance indicators are substitutes for the signals received and transmitted between customers and producers in the market place. It was believed that performance indicators would help to ameliorate the alleged unresponsiveness of institutions to external society and economy by providing a means to render institutions sensitive to market demands and needs.

King (1992) argues that, if 'imperfect information available for 'customers' ... prevents the required exercise of knowledgeable consumer choice', the response *atypical* of the market would be to introduce a system where inspectors and assessors must act as customer proxies. Instead,

the market response would be to improve the quality of information available to the public by removing the obstacles to market forces, rather than the introduction of alternative (i.e. governmental) mechanisms (King 1992:40).

Pollitt (1988:10) notes that the 'recent articulation of 'performance indicators' in many parts of the public sector ... has been tailored to the needs of politicians and top management'. Johnes and Taylor (1990) argue that it is contradictory to believe that quasi-market mechanisms stimulates responsiveness and reduces obstacles to market forces. The growth in the powers, remit and significance of external assessments, assessors and funding agencies represents a growth in centralised power and implements bureaucratic-rational structures, technologies and concepts of control. This degree of centralisation and bureaucratisation contrasts with the flexibility and freedoms assumed characteristic of market-driven organisations. Indeed: assessment criteria express centrally determined ideas of and demands from higher education; the assessments act only as proxy for consumer 'satisfaction'; institutional status, 'market'-value and funding levels are contingent on these assessments; performance assessment on a national scale implies the identification of standardised and universally applicable criteria; and, assessments are a burden on time, financial and administrative resources. Increased central powers of determination reduce the ability of institutions to be flexible

to immediate, local and regional demands and to develop more sophisticated and appropriate concepts and criteria of performance and provision. The statutory agencies occupy an all-powerful position and represent a reinforcement, rather than deregulation of centralised decision-making and response.

Discourse as a tool of reform: Clarke and Newman (1997:92) identify discourse as both strategy and effect of public sector reform. They argue that discourse is a practical technology; it justifies and implements change through,

productive power rather than merely controlling power. ... the adoption of managerial and business language both serves to legitimate organisations and to change roles and goals within them. ... New language can be used to symbolise change and to mobilise new identifications and commitments. But language also provides the tools with which individuals make sense of who they are within the changing fields of knowledge that pervade their environments.

Structural changes generate new relations and identities; accountability might be defined in terms of these new relations and identities. Academics become managers in control of cost centres, 'rather than try and control professionals by managers, you convert professionals into managers (i.e. by giving them budgets or by setting them adrift as quasi-autonomous business units)' (Hoggett 1994:43). Higher education changes from a social institution to a service offering a range of products; academics become service providers; the student becomes external consumer of services with a

right to 'voice' and 'choice' and a right to demand and expect self-determined ideas of satisfactory service provision. Ideas of the manager-academic, the student-customer, and higher education as a service, are discursive constructs that are a product of structural changes. These discursive constructs mobilise and further reinforce the logical implications and intentions of structural change. They are also representations that are externally generated, and yet present students and academics with new potential identities, with imperatives to conform in particular ways, and with a nomenclature to characterise the nature of change. The nomenclature provides the tools for sense-making rationalisation of the 'new order', but also focuses resistance by providing named targets for resistance. However, whilst useful as means to pinpoint and characterise change, the labels are potentially reductionist: the objectification may mobilise or frustrate change without reflecting or expressing full conceptual critique of what is to be advanced or halted.

The discourse of The Charter for Higher Education: The Charter Movement is a manifestation of discourses of individualism, market values and marketised concepts of the costs and benefits of public service provision (Pollitt 1993). The Charter movement symbolises a consumerist idea of accountability in the public sector. It defines individual rights and expectations in respect of their opportunities to effect change through participation in decision-making, through feedback, or through choice. The idea of a 'social' contract is replaced by that of a 'private' contract that emphasises returns to the individual in terms of pecuniary costs and benefits. Where deficiencies are identified, change is effected through mechanisms that facilitate and uphold the

individual's rights for personal redress and response, as opposed to consensus-oriented processes of democratic or collective reasoning and debate that seeks change on the basis of the greater social good.

The Charter for Higher Education, 'Higher Quality and Choice' (DfE 1993) set out what each individual student might expect in return for the time and money they invest in higher education. The Charter had no legally binding status, and yet its conceptual and rhetorical imperatives led institutions to incorporate the Charter in terms appropriate to their own contexts. In so doing, institutions also incorporated the ideological laden discourse, and with that, the values, interests and conceptual framework of the Charter movement. In these terms, for example, a student who articulates a criticism is assumed self-interested and self-serving, rather than motivated by a sense of commitment to future students or by an interest in improving conditions for all within the university.

Democratic accountability [1]. Internal and professional dialogue: Clarke and Newman (1997) argue that quangos seek to legitimise their actions and decisions by means of 'consultations'. From this perspective, consultations are strategic events that progress the interests of the quango, rather than genuine attempts to learn the views of those outside the circles of 'policy formation' (S. J. Ball 1994). Ostensibly, the boards of the HEFCs and the HEQC conduct negotiations on behalf of the higher education sector. Yet academics, institutional leaders and students articulate their views via their respective representative organisations in response to issues raised first by the HEFCs

or the HEQC; furthermore these issues have been advanced and shaped from the outset by the demands of the policy agenda. Questions concerning the nature and purpose of higher education raise political, social and philosophical issues, and will be addressed differently according to the perspectives of each individual constituency. In this context, the bureaucratic and restrictive nature of a consultation is inadequate; the identification of structures, mechanisms and criteria of quality assurance and assessment demands an ongoing, open and responsive debate.

‘Consultation’ is a limited ‘public debate’. It is also a restricted form of professional discussion. Professional discussion is a form of negotiation and debate, both with peers and the beneficiaries of higher education, about general or particular questions of beneficiaries’ needs and interests. Whilst managerialist ‘consultations’ concern the means through which professionals can be held to account, they also undermine the profession’s and professionals’ capacity and responsibility to determine adequate practice and provision.

Democratic accountability [2]. Social justice: In addition to the traditional responsibility for probity in the use of public funds, ‘accountability’ also embraces and upholds the idea that public service provision is a facet of a democracy.

‘Accountability’ reflects and sustains the social contract that exists between the professional service provider and society. Yet, Avis (1996) argues that these new techniques of audit and assessment might, in theory, be identified as a democratic advance on the previous position where society had little purchase on the work of

professionals, and simply had to trust their ethical commitment, competence and expertise. However he argues that the bureaucratic-rational, market driven, and managerialist interpretations of accountability represent an 'evacuation of politics' from education. First, managers are raised in status and power relative to others within and outwith the organisation who wish to influence the nature of service provision. Second, decisions are arrived at on the basis of information, financial position or the manager's expertise, rather than as the outcome of an open, social debate.

Pollitt (1993) criticises managerialism because this substitutes technical or financial questions for questions of social justice. He argues that public services deal with 'messy' and difficult social problems; any solution will represent a statement of values and a compromise between a range of competing alternatives. Thus decisions about public services should not be tied to managerial targets or interests or to institutional attempts to raise market status. The pursuit of these targets and interests may conflict with the responsibility to act in the interests of social welfare. Similarly, 'whatever the merits of market economies, their distributive consequences clearly do not satisfy need-based criteria of justice, and hence their obvious unsuitability for the provision of goods and services where such criteria are relevant' (Keat 1991:217-8).

Moreover, managerial power devalues and erodes the ideas of democracy and social justice at the same time as it reduces governmental responsibility for the operation of higher education and its institutions. The ideas that managers are, and should be in control, and legitimately possess supreme powers of determination, erodes the concept that, and the means by which, the government might be held to account for the impact

of higher education funding and policy. In contrast, it is the manager who is now responsible, accountable and subject to penalty.

Accountability as an effect of legitimisation: Clarke and Newman (1997:88-9) argue that organisations seek to legitimise themselves by incorporating features of institutions that are valued in the external environment. In the context of market-driven managerialism, accountability is now demonstrated by external projection of symbols of the successful organisation:

the development of the managerial state has led to more, not less search for organisational legitimacy. ... Being seen to be 'well managed and business-like' is clearly an advantage. A raft of new institutional practices - league tables, forms of audit, charter marks, performance indicators and so on - have been introduced. ...

As organisations compete for government funding and for contracts for the delivery of services, not to mention customers for their services, their reputation becomes of critical importance. As the characteristics of the 'successful organisation' are refined and redefined, so all organisations face the pressure to comply: "we can't not have one".

Universities experience a pressure to reproduce the external symbols of the well-managed, consumer friendly commercial organisation. Universities attach significance to annual reports, prospectuses and web-sites beyond their informational content. These documents are means to develop corporate identity and are one form of marketing

(Shore and Selwyn 1998). Yet such symbols of accountability are shallow and superficial. At the same time, they are merely easily produced artefacts that appear to demonstrate organisational efficiency, they also say little about the nature of the university as a higher education organisation: a new logo, a glamorous website, or a newly refurbished reception gives little indication of the internal values, cultures and practices of teaching and research.

Accountability and autonomy: Assertions that structures and mechanisms of accountability did not contravene institutional autonomy and academic freedom are contingent on two assumptions. The first assumption is that assessment processes do not result pressures to conform and perform to the criteria of assessment. The second is that the specification of criteria for the management and organisation of curriculum delivery has no impact on the processes and outcomes of teaching and learning. The former assumption is discounted by educational theory relating to students' responses to assessment. The second is discounted by the idea that curriculum is the outcome of *both* processes and formats of delivery.

Academics retain control over curriculum content, and are only subject to criteria relating to efficient management and organisation of teaching and learning. Yet controls on organisation, structure and tools – for example what counts as effective presentation - do represent incursions on autonomy and freedoms. Moreover, because the 'efficiency' value of courses is defined in terms of their relevance to the economy there is additional pressure on academics to tailor courses in respect of non-academic

criteria - for example through explicit attempts to develop students' transferable or key skills.

Whilst structures and mechanisms of accountability were tight and binding, it has been argued that criteria of performance remained vague and ambiguous (Barnett et. al. 1994). Rendering criteria ambiguous might well be an attempt to veil the extent to which policy represented pressures on institutions and academics to direct their work and outputs in specific directions. Nevertheless, the panopoly of structures and mechanisms for external monitoring, scrutiny, and judgement of institutional and academic organisation and work has developed from the Jarratt Report into a full-blown architecture of surveillance. The intangibility of criteria gives misleading impression that policy intended a 'hands-off' approach. Shore and Roberts (1995) describe this in Foucauldian terms using the analogy of Bentham's Panopticon. The Panopticon functions precisely because the observed has no means of knowing the source of power or locus of control. The observed exists with the perception of permanent observation and internalises the force of scrutiny as a form of self-discipline, in the knowledge that to not do so will result in sanction. Institutions' and academics' construals of acceptable work and organisation become the criteria of performance about which they feel personally responsible. The force and criteria of performance are, however, externally derived:

the source of ultimate authority is difficult to locate ... State intervention in education is therefore disguised through the recruitment of intermediary agencies and bodies. The official line in HEFCE documents is that 'the Council does not

want to be prescriptive' and 'that all institutions can achieve excellence, measured against the objectives which they set for themselves'. As a result the system is seemingly decentralised and institutions and individuals are 'empowered' in the sense that they are 'invited' to define their own yardsticks for 'excellence'.

However this apparent freedom is counterbalanced by the existence of externally imposed inspectorates and the publication of results in competitive and hierarchical league tables, which in turn necessitate the standardisation of statistical indicators and assessment procedures (Shore and Roberts 1995:12).

Thus whilst assessments criteria are vague, institutions are forced to 'read the tea leaves' (Barnett et al. 1994). The architecture of surveillance, that enables judgement and the application of financial and individual sanction necessitates a search by the institutions and individuals whom will then be subject to the means and measures of control they seek. This is not an internalised ethic characteristic of professional responsibility and sense of obligation; it is an externally enforced form and process of self-induced self-subjugation.

Managerial accountability: The transformation of academics into managers achieves for them greater status and power relative to other academics. Thus 'structural decentralisation and the 'right to manage' also creates a power base from which managers can act in ways not always intended by politicians' (Clarke and Newman 1997:105). However what happens within the institution 'cannot be abstracted from the wider structural transformations and treated as an independent level of analysis. It is

precisely the structural and ideological shifts that create the fields of tensions, constraints and possibilities within which the processes of institutional elaboration take place' (Clarke and Newman 1997:104). The rhetoric of market freedoms and managerial empowerment conceals the extent to which conditions within the 'quasi-market' and the context for management are shaped and dictated by the intended and unintended consequences of government policy.

Despite rhetorics of the benefits of allowing managers their 'rightful' freedom to manage, managers are highly constrained by both the marketised and the state-controlled bureaucratic context for higher education in two ways. First, the management agenda is set by the structures, mechanisms and criteria of quality audit and assessment. The work of 'institutionally owned' statutory bodies, or 'peer' assessors is shaped and influenced by what government considers are effective and adequate forms and objectives of scrutiny. The results of assessments impact on the institution in terms of market status, institutional image and financial health; the consequences of this influence and direct the work of managers. Second, the imperatives for greater levels of explicit management, reflect the exigencies of a rapidly changing and vulnerable context and the demands of provision that is responsive to the consumer and market.

In this context managerial ideologies, discourses, structures and technologies are useful to managers when attempting to counter resistance amongst academics who are reluctant to relinquish traditional freedoms and autonomy (Pollitt 1990, King 1992). Yet the exigencies and challenges of the context for academic work and organisation

are also constraints on managers. Managers are responsible and accountable for maintaining institutional viability and performance at the same time as they work within contextual constraints: there are reduced financial resources to facilitate change such that there are relatively few options available to them; managers have restricted capacity to define institutional performance criteria; managers are vulnerable to the outcomes of assessment, audits and non-market judgements of academic provision; and managers are themselves subject to the constraints of external scrutiny. Institutional managers carry greater responsibility without necessarily possessing the resources, tools and freedoms necessary for effective management.

Accountability assessed: Accountability is reduced from the ideas of a social and democratic contract and from a professional relationship with clients, to a concept of individual satisfaction in respect of their expectations of returns on their own personal and financial investments in higher education. The structures and mechanisms introduced to effect public accountability within higher education institutions are also underpinned by the desire to construct a 'quasi-market'. Professionals and institutional managers experience a greater sense of responsibility and observation, and are held accountable through an architecture of surveillance. Yet their freedoms and flexibility to achieve against new or enhanced objectives are restricted at the same time as the context in which they 'perform' is changing, challenging and increasingly complex.

4.2.3 Performance

The 1987 and 1991 White Papers were intended to 'improve the effectiveness of the system' (DES 1987:iv) and to 'enable institutions to make yet more effective responses to the increasing demand for higher education [bringing] benefits for the individuals who study as well as for the economy and society as a whole' (DES 1991:7; my emphases).

Pollitt (1993) argues that the idea of 'effectiveness' is a statement of the sort of knowledge that has value. He claims that within higher education policy, concerns with 'effectiveness' rank third behind concerns with 'efficiency' and 'economy'. Yet Cowen (1996:248) argues that recent higher education policy is the outcome of the delegitimisation of the university as a site of excellence:

the collapse of the legitimising principle which links science via philosophy to the discovery of truth ... permits a redefinition of (traditional) science: it becomes science in use [and] ... permits the subjugation of science, the university and social systems to the principle of performativity.

According to Pollitt (1990:60-1) the focus on the 'performance' of higher education is a 'manifestation of the modernisation dynamic'. In respect of higher education, this dynamic encompasses four key assumptions: first, that this is an age of social, economic and intellectual crisis, in which 'the political and economic health of nations now depends, to an unprecedented degree, on the performance of higher education'; second,

that higher education has failed to 'measure up to the needs of contemporary society'; third, that prominent needs are for greater access and enhanced 'competence'; and fourth, that acceptance of those needs by universities will only be achieved through 'intervention by society in the universities' sphere of legitimate authority'.

From the perspective of 'performance' and 'performativity', 'effectiveness' implies an interest in the low-cost production (efficiency) of knowledge that is of value in the external market place and of use to the economy. The idea of 'performativity' encapsulates 'effectiveness' and translates this as 'efficiency' and 'economy'. In order to ensure cheap production of instrumental knowledge it becomes necessary to effect political and economic controls over the means of production - the higher education production process:

The universities and old polytechnics, now all 'universities' have been turned into factories for the production of degree-holders, and their teaching staff ranked by their publications in specialist journals in a competitive system of performance tests upon which funding and even job prospects depend (Hutton 1995:216).

Pollitt, Cowen and Hutton suggest that the underlying theme in efforts to assess 'quality' in and of higher education is an interest in testing for 'effectiveness' and 'performativity'. Testing for 'quality' is thus a question of identifying tangible, measurable quantities. As a consequence, forms of knowledge that are either unquantifiable, or not of direct instrumental value are devalued:

it is no doubt unfashionable to see the aim of any sort of education as the cultivation in the minds of the uninitiated of a sort of wisdom, as opposed to skills, techniques, information or money-earning capacities (O'Hear 1989:21).

O'Hear argues that higher education is in danger of succumbing to the modernisation dynamic such that knowledge is valued for its 'superficial appearances'. From this perspective, learning is present as an objectifiable artefact; it is a solution to the social, economic and intellectual crisis because it is conceptualised and valued as a technology, rather than as process that implies the cultivation of wisdom and understanding.

According to Peters (1992) the significance of the 'modernisation dynamic' is that learning and research activity are recognised as knowledge only when they fit with the interests of 'techno-science'; they are valuable as technological solutions when they 'perform' in the market place such that the use of learnt or established knowledge serves to enhance social and economic status and gives effect to increased social and economic power. When the test of knowledge is the interests of 'techno-science' the idea of higher education as an institution for the cultivation of minds, or the development of non-applied or humanist means of knowing is debunked.

Performance indicators: Barnett (1992a:45) argues that statistical indicators of performance are essentially meaningless. It is, he says, 'far easier to raise technical and procedural issues than to raise fundamental issues connected with the aspirations and ultimate values which lie behind different approaches to quality. However both the system of performance measurement, and the actual measures used, are value-ridden,

they reflect government interests in the control and direction of higher education, and the operation of 'technological reason' as the solution to societal problems (Barnett 1992a, 1992b).

Elton (1987) and Ball and Wilkinson (1994) explain that the list of performance indicators, developed by the CVCP in immediate response to the Jarratt Report, reflected what was available to measurement, rather than any fundamental statement of values or considered evaluation of the nature and purpose of higher education. Yet whilst the haste in which performance indicators reflected the perceived need to avoid the government intervention feared likely if institutions did not quickly produce a set of their own, the CVCP spent a further 3 years in consideration of 'input' variables for reason of the ease with which such information can be gathered and collated (Johnes and Taylor 1990). In 1990 the PCFC also produced a report that advocated the development of a set of performance indicators that would demonstrate that the polytechnic sector was 'well managed, accountable, performance conscious, a good investment and ... credible' (Morris Report 1990, cited in Ball and Wilkinson 1994:420). In the view of the Report it was essential that indicators met with the requirements of the PCFC. As a statutory government agency, rather than an institutionally owned or constituted body, it can be argued that 'satisfactory' indicators were those that also met with the approval of government fundholders.

The adoption of performance indicators by and into higher education institutions reinforced a single orientation to management; thus other approaches, such as a developmental model arguably better suited to the nature and needs of professional

work (Pollitt 1988) or to educational work (Barnett 1992a, 1992b), were excluded. As a paradox of the logic of assessment, a focus on indicators that are neither relevant nor beneficial to the educational process, conflicts with the rhetorical assertion that assessments of performance were compatible with government strategies to enhance the performance of higher education.

Criteria and judgements established by outside agencies are summative assessments of the past performance of the whole institution; they are located away from those engaged in the local and individual processes of higher education teaching and learning; and, they give no meaningful guides to development and improvement because they are de-contextualised and unrelated to the person or situation. The process of identifying and measuring 'quality' relegates questions of the meaning and implications of those measures of 'quality'. Developmental activity and secondary reflection is not built into the collection of indicators, and yet without it they remain devoid of meaning, utility and worth. The focus on input and output indicators leaves the process of education as a 'black box'. If higher education is a 'complex human activity ... the sureness, the stability and even the objectivity that numerical performance indicators seem to offer is illusory. To believe that we can say something of real insight about the quality of an educational process by describing it in numerical terms is an illusion. Qualities and quantities are different kinds of entity' (Barnett 1992b:12-13). Moreover it is the student that represents and achieves the 'quality' of the output; the focus on institutional performance is akin to a theatre critic paying attention to the stage floor, rather than the actor and his or her interaction with the rest of the attributes of the performance.

Cowen (1996:256) argues that when definitions of quality and attempts to produce quality are left as matters 'for managerial expertise ... the university is attenuated precisely because quality now needs to be operationally defined and ... definitions of that quality and surveillance of that quality are [tasks] heavily located in the hands of experts outside of it'. Peters argues that academics should engage in criticism of a world which privileges knowledge as applied performance in the marketplace, which believes in the capacity of techniques derived from 'contemporary positivist forms' of empiricist science 'to manage civil institutions and to measure their performance' (p.131). Failing this, the idea of a university as a place where competing ideas of knowledge are debated and critiqued, and as a place for continual debate concerning the process, values and social benefits of higher education, is lost. Peters asserts that it is essential that 'educationalists do not come to accept and treat performance indicators as a value-free technical process which can be applied unproblematically. [They] imply a point of reference and are, therefore, relative rather than absolute in character ... they inherently involve value-judgements (p.127; emphasis in the original). It is salient that Pollitt (1988) notes that 'the lesson of organisation theory is that once in place – however provisionally – new procedures and structures often quickly become very difficult to change in any fundamental way'. The best form of resistance to managerialist models of performance assessment is not to implement them.

Performance appraisal: Pollitt (1988:8) suggests that concerns with efficiency and economy are characteristic of a managerial ideology, in which forms of staff appraisal include,

highly standardised ... procedures (e.g. rating scales, boxes ticked) to enable management to compare members of staff with one another. Appraisal is a regular process, undertaken at an interval convenient for other personnel management routines (rather than being undertaken at times when the appraisee feels s/he needs an appraisal) ... Dominant criteria for performance tend to be mainly those to do with efficiency and economy rather than with ... quality (or 'process utilities' such as enthusiasm, excitement, originality).

He warns that the efforts of managers to control staff performance in such ways are 'self-defeating' because they are 'not well suited to services dominated by highly-organised professional providers. They run against the grain of those organisational cultures, and are (correctly) perceived by many of the professionals concerned as hostile political stratagems. ... [Moreover] there is a good deal of fairly hard-nosed evidence indicating both that in such settings managerialist schemes seldom achieve their objectives and that other, more effective models of appraisal are available' (p.15).

Despite arguing for the possibility of identifying 'measures' and 'variables' of effective teaching, and their inclusion within the range of measures of efficiency used by the CVCP, Elton (1987) acknowledges a perspective that implies such an effort would be redundant, if not also contradictory. From this perspective, the enhancement of teaching is a product of 'frank criticism between peers' the development of a 'strong self-critical academic body', and 'practices that entail peer intrusion, lifting the veil that normally shrouded the teaching behaviour of individual professors'. Goodlad (1987:246) explains that one of the reasons managerial models fail is because they

question the commitment of professionals; performance appraisal replaces 'inner directedness' with 'other-directedness', or 'extrinsic' rewards. The assumption that professionals are neither responsible nor trustworthy enough to maintain that commitment and the work involved, sends a message of low-expectations, with the consequence that appraisals 'are likely to diminish the responsibility people are willing to take for defining and re-defining standards'. Managerialist appraisals that focus on outcome measures and variables, rather than examine and value the processes of self-critical reflection and continual intra- and inter-disciplinary dialogue, are both derisive, and set in process a downward spiral of reduced dialogue, reduced performance and reduced commitment.

4.3. Efficiency, accountability and performance: critical questions

Responses to managerialism: According to Clarke and Newman (1997:86)

'managerialism can be viewed as an institution: a set of rules of action, shared typifications of the world, [and] shared cognitions which produce regularities of thought and action'.

The 'process of managerialisation' represents 'a shift in the 'rules of the game' for those working in public services. But it is also a social process in which actors make meanings and establish norms, conventions and habitual practices. ... Such perspectives acknowledge and seek to theorise the 'imperfections' of the workings of the market and of political incentives, highlighting the effects of 'bounded

rationality' implying that actors must develop adaptive solutions to imperfect knowledge. They also highlight the opportunistic behaviour of other actors, and the difficulties of monitoring and enforcing contracts for complex services (p.86-7).

Government policy is not imposed; it is enacted and incorporated through the engagement of institutions and individuals such that externally defined rules are operationalised only through a process of mediation. The nature of the 'game' itself depends on individual and institutional interpretations of and reactions to the 'rules':

within specific organisations, or specific groups within them, people 'play the game' in a different way with different priorities and with different orientations. Some adopt managerial frameworks avidly. Some hold on to older loyalties and identities (while often learning to play the new games with great success), and some attempt to bend or shape the rules to pursue a range of personal, organisational or social agendas. ... The processes of creative adaptation ... are adaptations to the rise of managerialism. They ... deal with the problems of how to make managerialised organisations meaningful, habitable and workable in divergent ways (p.103-105).

It is in the interests of higher education to act to sustain the status of universities in order to maintain 'their hegemony over the higher education sphere' (Salter and Tapper 1992:11). Yet 'any attempt by the state to impose ideological, financial or administrative pressure upon the universities is ... likely to produce a different response from different universities' (p.32); thus those universities with the greatest socio-

political power (Edwards 1998) and prestige have been most able to resist *and* continue in the new conditions. Yet across the higher education sector, in which institutions are divided, atomised and pitted against each other in competition, it is in the interests of individual institutions not to act collectively in respect of mutual needs or out of altruistic empathy.

Shore and Roberts (1995) describe current scrutiny, regulation and vulnerability as an experience of 'permanent institutional angst'. This is a product of a 'divide and rule policy' that results in 'fear, destructive internal rivalries and the fragmentation of solidarity' within institutional academic communities. Fragmentation of the higher education sector, both in terms of the stake and interests of individuals and individual institutions, and their identification with themselves as a community, disables collective capacity to orchestrate and engage in resistance.

Edwards (1998) describes higher education as a 'sommunity', and highlights some of the ways in which academics have been complicit in assisting the incorporation and implementation of government policy. She argues that it 'may appear that, of the stakeholders in higher education, the academic community has had most to lose by recent innovations. But it can be argued that sufficient members of the community have 'bought into' the range of discourse which accompanies these changes or 'employed impositions for their own ends', to make the transformation a viable proposition'.

claims that,

quality and excellence are proclaimed as the central values of higher education.

They are rarely defined. When they are, it is commonly done in terms of research and specialised study, not general education and the experience of learning. ...

Critics of higher education, both politicians and employers, have in recent years called for improved cost-effectiveness - lower unit costs and better educated graduates. Defenders of higher education have interpreted this as a threat to quality and the provision of adequate resources. ... The demand that more be achieved with fewer resources is perceived by those within the system as a direct affront to higher education’s central value. The real tragedy is the gulf of perception between those within the system who feel threatened, and those outside it who wish to see it improved.

This extract, from Ball’s report to the Royal Society for Arts, which was financed by industrial sponsors, attempted to mediate between the interests of higher education, government and industry. Ball argues for a social consensus over a definition of the purpose of higher education, asserting that the logic of academics’ defensive claims that ‘high-cost’ represents ‘high-quality’ is unfounded. He claims that universities have a moral duty to change culturally and structurally to allow greater participation such that so that ‘low-cost’ need not equate to or lead to ‘low quality’. The academy, populated by academics removed from societal upheavals and more interested in preserving and observing their own research interests has a duty to open itself up to more students.

Expansion is realised as a question of social justice when these additional participants benefit to the degree enjoyed by the previous small elite. Social justice will only be realised through thorough-going internal reform. In his terms, the reform of higher education is a question greater than, and is in conflict with, a re-orientation that emphasises market values and interests; adequate reform is expressed in qualitative form and involves the realisation of moral values, rather than the identification and measurement of *valuable* quantities.

Necessary responses to ‘modernisation’ [2]. Knowledge and society:

‘Crudely speaking society is coming to determine the forms of knowing that it wishes for itself. It is no longer content to leave their definitions to the academics, ... or even their production. Higher education is having to respond to the epistemological agenda being put to it by the wider society’

Barnett 1994:1).

Barnett argues that the legitimacy principle of universities - the production of disciplinary knowledge on the basis of reason, on condition of autonomy from the needs, interests and changing values in society - has broken down. The development of competing sources of knowledge generation, the collapse of faith in grand narratives and the demand for ‘useful’ knowledge have induced new contexts and challenges for higher education and have changed the conditions and principles for public investment in higher education.

The changed context for higher education reflects the complex nature of a 'modern society ... framed by definite dominant interests and ideologies. These include pragmatic interests in competing successfully in global economic trade, in being able to control the total (social, technological and human) environment successfully, and in producing a consensual allegiance across the manifold social groupings to the mission of the state itself' (p.18). Barnett explains how knowledge and society exist in dialectical relation; thus higher education must always be a reflection of societal pressures. Within modern society irrelevant knowledge may well be that which is of little instrumental value. Yet what is needed is a view, espoused within and upheld by higher education, that knowledge is of little value if it neither acknowledges and takes into account the ways in which knowledge always reflects and is contingent on society, nor accounts for itself as representative of a particular 'set of interests and forces'.

Thus disinterested and inwardly focused academic research can be criticised for its lack of response to, fit with, and use in society. A higher education that neglects the problems and interests of wider society is weakened, not only because society fails to value knowledge without productive relevance and use, but also because such knowledge proves itself to be unable to account for, to relate to, or to deal with contemporary culture, economy and society. If higher education is to perform in respect of its privileged and specialist function in society, it must analyse, appraise and engage with society. In this way, higher education might be more than of instrumental value: it would be in a position to inform and enhance society's capacity for reflexive understanding of, and engagement with, its own interests.

In Barnett's view, whilst universities are changing in response to the demands of the complex modern society, the shift is contradictory. Whilst such shifts are indicative of responsiveness to societal needs and interests, this may well be just a pragmatic attempt to maintain institutional legitimacy and viability. Whilst this reinforces the one-dimensional epistemological agenda in which instrumental and operational knowledge is valued, the pragmatic lurch 'is happening under the direction, orchestration and active influence of the state' (p.18). Alternatively, but no less seriously, the lurch may be seen as an uncontrolled flexibility that reflects an incapacity to offer external critique of either the dominant concepts of and interests in knowledge, or the government agenda for higher education. This incapacity is, he argues, symptomatic of a profession that has historically tended to produce knowledge from an entrenched and inward-looking perspective, from a position of self-isolation from society, and without reflexive and critical attention to its own epistemological practices:

the university fails to practice what it preaches. The gulf between theories-in-use and espoused theories which the critical academics love to observe in others is to be found in glaringly sharp form in the academy. Having trapped itself into narrow definitions of knowledge, it is unable to provide the wider definitions of knowing and intellectual development which it supremely should have been in a position to supply and which are now required by society (p.24).

Both Ball and Barnett point out that higher education is under threat because universities are caught between tradition and the future, fluctuating between stasis and truculent acceptance of popular demand and the 'dominant interests' of industry and

government. Attempts to maintain the self-concept of privileged distance and elite status can be preserved only from a position of retreat. Yet continued recoil from societal prominence, and the lack of acceptance of responsibility for demands made by a society in which higher education is, nevertheless, implicated, is increasingly unjustifiable. Such retreat also represents a failure of both practical and intellectual capacity. Higher education fails to contribute a counter-argument to the dominant interests of the state, and lacks a systematic critique of and critical engagement with social and cultural trends.

Necessary performances in response to managerialism: Managerialism is a programme for increasing institutional performance against a backdrop of market and bureaucratic-rational ideologies and partial definitions of 'efficiency' and 'accountability'. It is a process through which new structures and technologies that seek control over the work of professionals and re-definitions of the process and purpose of higher education have been legitimated and implemented. It is a response to, and thus reflection of a 'modernisation dynamic'. This conflicts with and attempts to counter and devalue what are alleged to be ineffective educational structures, cultures, values and processes. However both the traditional and the modern need full and open critical conceptualisation; both require critique and neither is adequate as concept of, or basis for, higher education today.

Nevertheless, both managerialism and modernisation progress through dialectical relation with what exists: the means of legitimisation and implementation act with, and

are mediated through, the traditional. Whilst traditions must change, both self-subjugation and truculent resistance are inadequate and unjustifiable responses. The dialectic relation can be harnessed as an opportunity for a critical response in argument with both modernisation and managerialism.

Higher education will survive as institution and concept if it is able to find ways of critical engagement with society that is relevant to both social demands and social needs. Without a critical capacity, universities will fold as institutions through lack of finance. Yet if they survive in an uncritical state and continue the pursuit of knowledge according to its instrumental value, this will be at the cost of the idea of the university. The reaction of higher education institutions and constituencies appears crucial.

4.5. Trust, security and the demoralisation of the profession(als)

Policy that aimed for cost-reduction, productivity and responsiveness demanded high levels of change, experimentation and entrepreneurial risk. Organisations were required to learn, and this necessitated conditions of stability and trust. Furthermore, forms of work organisation and practice that give rise to both efficiency and innovation, such as team-working and collaboration, are conditional on personal and inter-personal security.

Reed and Anthony (1993) argue that public services are complex organisations that operate on the basis of high-trust in professionals. Professionals are morally involved in their work, and sustain a personal commitment to it. This commitment forms the basis

of 'normative compliance, negotiated order, and intimate co-operation between a rich diversity of groups' (p.198). Thus service provision, and the maintenance of high quality, are conditional upon, and a reflection of, high-trust, morally grounded motivations, and ethical commitment within the organisation:

All complex organisations would break up in anarchic disorder if they were not maintained by some degree of trust. ... All organisations that succeed in persisting over time are communities, and all communities are held together by moral bonds of reciprocal obligation underpinned by trust relationships that have some significance and meaning in shaping work performance (pp.198 and 200).

Goodlad (1987:245) took the view that the 1987 White Paper would:

result in a further increase of the power at the political centre and a corresponding diminution of power at the periphery - that is, in the institutions in which higher education is carried out. Perhaps more important than the administrative measures proposed is the implied distrust by government ... of the networks of guilds and professional associations which have until very recently regulated and managed the considerable areas of public and intellectual life.

Trow (1993) argued that the 1991 White Paper (DES 1991) represented massive distrust in the traditional professional ethic of continual enhancement of expertise and establishing practices in consultation with both peers and service-users. In conditions of declining resource and control, and simultaneous increases in public expectations, the

operation of mechanisms that imply distrust and enable scrutiny would place extra burdens on already disheartened academics, in terms of direct financial, time and administrative cost, and in respect of lost productivity in scholarship.

Walsh (1994:62-4) argues that the low trust dynamic gives rise to accusation of fault, to penalties, and to consequent strategies of evasion, necessitating the evolution of tighter rules and greater and more elaborate surveillance. In contrast, within a high trust dynamic 'failure is not an occasion for blame but for help. Those facing difficulties are likely to co-operate in finding ways to improve performance if they are not punished for failure'. Yet,

the less we trust people the more we are forced to engage in surveillance, which is likely to be significantly more expensive than developing the bases on which we can rationally trust others. [Thus] systems in which everything is measured are also likely to be systems in which there is a reduction in learning, especially learning through mistakes ... [because] experimentation and risk are likely to be avoided.

In conditions of penalty based scrutiny the conditions for the enhancement of academic work appear less likely, because they are replaced by degrees of insecurity and subversion in the classroom, staff room and research centres, that are counter-productive to growth in learning, intellectual capacity and fruition of knowledge.

Trust in, and the moral vitality of professionals is essential to the organisation and functioning of public service institutions. The constitutive internally negotiated 'order'

is an expression, reflection and reinforcement of both the public value of the service, and professionals' value-commitment to that service. Moreover it is also the means by which the service is upheld; it is an affective process that binds people together in a working and re-worked process. It is not a reflection of, nor can it be replaced by a set of procedures, rules, and fixed systematic process enforced externally or by management.

Bureaucratic-rational and market driven means of organisational control are not equivalent to the processes and commitments reflected in the idea of 'negotiated order'. They are insufficient to sustain the fabric of the organisation on which the health of the product depends. The managerial approach to performance obscures the centrality of both community and community relations to both the production process and the stability of the organisation. Reed and Anthony suggest that the cost of a managerial approach that undermines the values and processes of 'negotiated order' is borne *both* by the public and by public sector professionals: the nature and standard of services decline at the same time as professionals work harder to secure the conditions necessary to their work.

Bureaucratic and market based approaches to management replaces 'normative' commitment with structures and technologies that enforce compliance and competition in the market place. Educational products are commodities with a price, and professionals are valued in terms of their outputs. Demoralisation is a concept that reflects the extraction of morally grounded social processes from the understanding of public sector work.

The policy agenda is both internally contradictory, and generates conditions such that internal changes within institutions, and changes to the relationship between higher education and society, are likely to be fragmentary, confused and contentious. At the same time they will be grounded on a lack of critical conceptualisation and understanding, and take place in a spirit of moral and professional decline.

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER FIVE

A Conceptual Analysis of the Meaning and Use of ‘Quality’

Introduction

This chapter makes use of the conclusions made in my own discourse analysis of the use of ‘quality’ within policy texts and texts issued by statutory agencies during the period 1987 – 1996. ‘Quality’ is used as if its meaning is self-evident and common sense: a concept of virtue and excellence. However close analysis reveals that ‘quality’ is also used as an imperative; it is a concept drawn on to introduce, legitimate and mobilise the ideologically informed ambitions of government policy. Thus ‘quality’ refers to a distinct, if ambiguously explained, set of ideas and intentions. In this sense, ‘quality’ is not an ambiguous concept that is available to contest. ‘Quality’ is tightly defined.

This concept of ‘quality’ is, however, available to critique. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which ‘quality’ is critiqued within higher education literature. I argue that the critique is largely inadequate: literature often argues from within the dominant, managerial, paradigm of interests and assumptions that are implied, and enforced, by the concept ‘quality’ in government policy. The chapter concludes by presenting an alternative to the managerial paradigm and appraises the implications of this contrasting view on ‘quality’ for higher education.

First I undertake a discourse analysis of the meaning and use of 'quality' within policy texts and texts issued by statutory agencies during the period 1987 – 1996. I argue that 'quality' is synonymous with, and encapsulates, ideas of 'efficiency', 'accountability' and 'performance'. Second I refer to texts that take a critical view of the managerialist paradigm underpinning government policy for the reform of the public sector; the authors argue that 'quality' is both a key term within, and instrumental to, the reform agenda. I discuss their conclusions in respect of policy for the reform of higher education. Third, I make use of extracts from three texts to introduce an alternative perspective on 'quality': two of the texts are works of literature, the third is an examination of 'quality' in respect of higher education. Fourth, I explain how debate concerning the meaning of 'quality' fails to provide adequate critique of 'quality'. Debate focuses initially on the assertion that 'quality' is an ambiguous and contestable concept and yet fails to pursue this critique to its logical conclusion. Instead discussion turns to the implications for management of the various ideas of 'quality' proposed. In conclusion, I discuss how 'quality' might be meaningful as an ongoing process of contest over, and realisation of, values.

5.1. A Discourse Analysis of the Use of 'Quality' in Policy and Statutory Texts

First I detail my approach to discourse analysis. Second I look at dictionary definitions of 'quality'. Third I turn to policy and statutory texts to examine how the word 'quality' is used. I conclude that the use of 'quality' serves multiple functions, and that

this suggests 'quality' is useful for reason of its surface ambiguity. However over the course of both policy development and the work of statutory agencies the use of 'quality' has been used such that it refers to several layers of meaning that, nevertheless, crystallise on the ideological assumptions and interests of government policy. Furthermore, over time use of the word 'quality' changes. Initially it is used as if it is a diffuse term that is available to and demanding of definition in respect of a particular context. Over time, use of the word rests on the assumption that its meaning and referents are both widely known and also shared. Yet this latter assumption serves both to obscure the assumptions and intentions of policy at the same time as it cloaks them in a positive rhetoric.

5.1.1. Strategy of textual analysis

My analysis of policy texts, and national guidelines and codes of practice draws on Fairclough (1989), who argues that:

language is part of society, ... that language is a social process ... and that language is a socially conditioned process. ... It is an important property of productive and interpretative processes that they involve an interplay between properties of texts, ... [the] resources that people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts ... [and] the socially determined ... conditions of their use (Fairclough 1989:22-4).

Any discursive event, as 'text', might be analysed according to the properties and interaction of three dimensions: the text, text as discursive practice, and text as social practice.

Text: Within a spoken or written text, it is the choice and orchestration of words, structures and concepts that realise meaning; the spatial and contrastive relations of textual features organise and intend specific meanings. The representation of objects and subjects is a craft that involves placement of textual features such that these denote specific meanings. Omission, grammatical elision, the use of words that infer and contribute comparison, contrast, connotation, reference, metaphor, and analogy can be analysed in terms of their intentional representation of the subjects and objects of discourse.

the meaning of a word is not an isolated and independent thing. Words and other linguistic expressions ... enter into ... relationships of similarity, contrast overlap and inclusion. And the meaning of a single word depends very much on the relationship of that word to others (Fairclough 1989:94).

Interaction: A text can be understood as discursive practice. A text is produced in order to relate to an audience: words and structures are chosen in order to cohere with 'resources' that the audience would recognise as meaningful - such as facts, theories, experiences, assumptions and expectations. 'Resources' serve as 'cues' for interpretation, and 'cues' exist as 'traces' in the text. Thus a text can be analysed as a

‘product’ of discursive practice by examining traces of intentional language use: these reveal specific interests and ambitions and are indicative of the relation between text and the audience in question.

Context: A text can also be analysed as a moment of social practice. A text is produced within, and is produced in order to engage in a social context; both the production and interpretation of text is contingent on constraints and conditions of the social context. The interests and intentions of the text can be analysed by examining the fit or conflict between ‘traces’ and the type of social situation, institution and broader historical and political context.

According to Fairclough, ‘a language ... consists of clusters of words associated with meaning systems. Thus a full account of the word would require comparison of meaning systems, not just word meanings’ (1989:94).

The implication of this view is that the meaning of a word depends on its use within a particular context; in that context the meaning is discernable through examination of the ideological, historical and contemporary political and social referents and imperatives that pertain to a particular context. Furthermore, the meaning of the word is established in respect of its use in relation to and association with other words and concepts. The meaning of ‘quality’ is not inherent to the word itself: the meaning of a single word is flexible and embryonic, not fixed; it is however established and particular to its use in a given context. Thus the meaning of ‘quality’ might be analysed both in terms of its use within a given text, in respect of its internal, dialogic and external relations within that

text, and in terms of its development over the course of its use within a number of texts that belong within a shared ‘meaning system’.

5.1.2 Dictionary Definitions of ‘Quality’

Common use of words over time establishes shared understandings of the meaning, or possible meanings of a particular word. Dictionary definitions constitute the most frequent or typically understood meanings. Use of a word in a given context harnesses these commonly shared meanings, and yet might also create new dimensions of meaning. Dictionary definitions of ‘quality’ provide a starting point for analysis and a point of comparison to show deviation of use and change in meaning. The Collins Concise English Dictionary cites two functions of ‘quality’:

Quality n. [*qualis* - of what kind]

1. any of the features which make something what it is; characteristic; attribute,
2. basic nature; character; kind,
3. the degree of excellence a thing possesses,
4. excellence; superiority.

Definitions [1] and [2] suggest that the use of ‘quality’ with reference to an object or person infers or indicates the essential nature, or defining characteristics of that object or person. Definitions [3] and [4] make different claims. The use of the word ‘quality’

infers or indicates the relative [3] or absolute [4] degree of excellence attributable to a phenomenon under discussion.

‘Quality’ is a descriptor of a further object. It also calls attention to the special features of that object, either in the sense that these are definitive aspects by which the object might be recognised, or in the sense that these are valued features of that object. A claim concerning the ‘quality’ of an object will, in each case, reflect a set of interests and values: judgement of ‘quality’ draws on, and refers to the values and interests of the person who makes such a claim.

5.1.3. Use of ‘Quality’ in Policy and Statutory Texts

5.1.3.1 Higher Education: Meeting The Challenge

Quality

3.6 Quality can be judged by looking at:

academic standards as reflected by the design and content of courses, their fitness for purpose, what they require of students and how they meet the needs of employers;

the quality of teaching;

the achievements of the students both whilst in higher education and in subsequent employment; and

the quality of research - pre-commitment scrutiny and subsequent evaluation of achievement. (DES 1987:16)

In the above extract from the 1987 White Paper the function of 'quality' as it is first used is ambiguous. The use of 'quality' in this case might be understood as an abstract reference to the 'the essential nature' of higher education [1] [2], or alternatively it might infer a claim to an absolute measure of excellence [4]. However neither the constitutive elements of the 'essential nature', nor the means by which to recognise 'excellence', nor the values by which judgements of 'absolute excellence' might be drawn are stated directly.

The second use of 'quality' in the sub-heading implies that quality infers relative judgement [3]. The list of bullets first refers initially to a further concept, 'academic standards'. This bullet identifies the means by which to judge 'standards', and thus to judge 'quality'. These means are course content and design, the degree to which courses meet a need, the tasks that students are set, and the needs of employers. Therefore the meaning of 'quality' refers to academic standards, which are to be judged by reference to employers' needs, in respect of the employer's value-judgements, and in terms of the employer's interests in students as suitable employees. Such a reading of the text is supported by the emphasis on results and employment in bullet 3.

The second bullet identifies that the 'essential nature' or absolute excellence' of higher education is in part constituted by the 'quality' of teaching. Again, neither the nature of teaching, nor the values and interests that are to be drawn on in judging teaching are given. One has to assume therefore that judgement of 'quality', in terms of the 'quality' of teaching, will reflect the scrutineer's value judgement.

'Quality' is frequently used in everyday language to denote high status, value and achievement, or is used on the assumption of shared *cultural* norms, understandings and values. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary offers:

I. Of people. 1b Excellence, of character; good nature; virtue.

5b An accomplishment, an attainment, a skill.

II. Of things. 7c Excellence, superiority.

7d *quality newspaper*: 'considered to be of a high cultural standard'.

The use of 'quality' might also be understood as the rhetorical *assertion* of a 'common-sense' interpretation. A 'common sense' interpretation implies a *single* and *self-evident* meaning of 'quality'. The claim to a singular interpretation is an effect of power obtained by 'expert' or 'institutional' warrant (Fairclough 1989). By nature of its function within the parliamentary process and political system, any White Paper claims authority in respect of the institution of government, and in respect of democratically mandated 'expertise'. By implication, White Papers are self-legitimizing, rather than arguments. The authoritative use of 'quality' 'naturalises' or 'fixes' a singular meaning.

A rhetorical use of a word is designed to have impact on the way in which other elements of meaning are interpreted. 'Quality' is used to command attention, to furnish the document with grand overtones. The rhetorical use of the word claims 'virtue' as a meaning, the claims that are made in relation to 'quality' are raised in status, or legitimated. The idea of 'quality' is also motivational, it resonates with notions of excellence and high standards. An historical self-definition and aim of the university,

the achievement of higher intellectual pursuits coincides with the idea of quality as higher standards and excellence. Thus in the context of managerial policy, the use of 'quality' can be interpreted as a discursive device, employed to conceptualise policy aims as if these harmonise with those inherent to higher education.

'Quality' has a legitimating effect, and acts as a 'battle-cry' to mobilise both aims and claims. In addition, and yet paradoxically, the elusive nature of 'quality' leaves the exact referents, values and specifications of the policy implicit and understated, in comparison to the attention it commands to itself. The grand overtones of 'superiority' provide a contrast that has the effect of drawing attention away from the utility of the elliptical use of 'quality'. The utility of the ellipsis lies in obscuring the construction and production of a singular view of 'quality', and enables omission of discussion of the values and interests that are inherent to this idea of 'quality'. The omission of discussion of the values that derive the standard against which to judge the relative 'quality' of higher education', the values that derive a set of essential characteristics by which to identify higher education, or the values that define an absolute level of activity and performance that will be supported, *enables* the singular view of 'quality' and, by default, also the values and interests, to be asserted as commonly and consensually agreed and masks the idea and existence of contest. However, the assertion of a singular view is authoritarian, claims absolute definition of higher education, and sets a standard according to a single set of values and interests.

The elliptical use of 'quality' also provides an ambiguity and flexibility of discourse that enables dialogic discursive practice. The White Paper has many different audiences, such as those who share government interests and values, and the academic

community. The White Paper might be analysed in terms of the textual features that are constructed so as to appeal to the autonomous academic community and yet at the same time also stipulate new externally defined criteria for higher education. An example of this can be seen in the next extract:

Quality

- 3.5 Quality in higher education depends primarily upon the commitment of the academic community to the maintenance and improvement of standards. This cannot be created or imposed from the outside, but the Government, on behalf of the public can and will seek to ensure that systems are in place to promote and give effect to that commitment and to monitor the results.

(DES 1987)

‘Commitment’ resonates with ideas of virtue, ethics and professional practice. The use of ‘quality’ in association with ‘commitment’ is an appeal to the nature of academic professionalism, at the same time as it is also a warning. The simultaneous appeal and warning draws attention, implies that commitment is a condition of higher education work, and yet also implies that such commitment is not necessarily always in evidence.

The first sentence implies that both ‘commitment’, and ‘commitment to the maintenance and enhancement of standards’ are no more than what might already be expected of professional academics. Indeed, the next sentence commences in apparent confirmation of this reading. However, the break within that same sentence - ‘but’ -

serves to retract this view and assert an alternative, more authoritative position. The Governmental authority is emphasised by the subsequent warranting claim, that expresses democratic representation and advocacy of the 'public interest'. In turn, the reference to the 'public' is a construct that obscures identification of the Government as prime agent, and presents the planned interventions as democratically, as opposed to politically, motivated.

This final sentence is a complex series of couplets that reflect the dialogic nature of discourse practice. Each couplet, 'can / will'; 'seek / ensure'; 'promote / give effect to'; 'commitment / monitor', contains an assertion of moral right and statutory duty, and an assertion of intent. The former acts to justify the latter, and implies that the latter are unproblematic corollaries of the former. The first, hesitant half of each couplet reflects a distanced, trust relationship between the Government and the self-regulating academic community. The second half positions the Government as external regulator of academic standards and the contingent nature of academic autonomy.

In this extract, 'quality' refers to the introduction of externally defined means to monitor the commitment of the individual professional academic, and the academic community in terms of externally defined ends. These externally defined ends are laid out in the subsequent section in the White Paper, as already examined (see above).

Representation of the Governmental perspective as an 'external perspective' is a discursive construct that creates the appearance of responsible advocacy and yet serves as a disclaimer to counter accusations of political intent. The externalisation of the perspective asserted within the White Paper esteems it, and legitimates both the means

and the ends of the stated intentions. The assertion of the external perspective draws these values and interests into discourse as a concrete object and mobilises them as a reality.

The assertion of a need for greater public accountability is predicated on an assumption of, and implicit reference to, lacking and neglectful self-interest on the part of the academic community. Direct and implicit references to the moral and democratically based nature of Government intentions disables counter-perspectives because these would therefore appear 'immoral'. The text positions Government as powerful agent and diminishes the idea of an legitimate and authoritative academic community.

It is in this context that the idea of student feedback appears.

The Quality of Teaching

3.12 The maintenance of high standards of teaching can be helped by systematic arrangements for:

staff training and development;

staff appraisal;

evaluation of the results achieved, including analysis of external examiners' reports and students' employment patterns;

involvement of professional practitioners in vocational courses; and

feedback from students themselves.

(DES 1987:18)

'Quality' is used as an abstract noun, without a qualifying adjective, such as 'high' or 'low'. Therefore 'quality' again implies 'absolute excellence', or 'essential nature'. The referent of 'quality', is the maintenance of high standards of teaching. The idea of high standards implies the notion of a concrete standard, yet again, neither constitutive aspects of the standard, nor the values and interests that derive the standard are stated. Nevertheless, what is omitted as text can be identified in the context: 'high' standards of teaching are contingent on three means of external scrutiny, one means of internal scrutiny and 'training'. The constitutive aspects of the standard itself, might be understood to reflect the needs and assumptions of each interest group.

Just how the loosely coupled interest groups and elements contribute to the maintenance of 'high standards' of teaching is not explicitly stated, however the introductory sentence infers that the key feature of these activities is their 'systematic arrangement'. Thus the idea of 'systematic arrangement' gains status as hallmark and key to maintaining 'high standards' of teaching, at the same time as the idea of trust in academic's professional commitment to voluntary and self development is devalued.

Achievement of Students

3.15 Academic standards and the quality of teaching in higher education need to be judged by reference mainly to students' achievements. The numbers and class distribution of degrees awarded provide some measure as, conversely do non-completion rates. ... Thus subsequent employment patterns of students provide some indication of the value of higher education courses to working life. Evaluation of institutional performance also requires students' achievements, to be set alongside their

entry standards. Greater attention needs to be given to these questions both nationally and by institutions; and the essential data on performance in each institution should be published so that its record can be evaluated by the funding agencies, governing bodies, students and employers.

(DES 1987:18)

Here, both academic standards, and the 'quality' of teaching are understood to be determinants of students' achievements. Students' achievements thus become the standard by which 'quality' and academic standards are judged. The nature of students' achievements lies in their value within the employment market. This extract implies that students' employment patterns are used as means to identify the 'quality' of teaching and academic standards.

In order to justify the requirement for the measurement, analysis and publication of data, reference is made to the groups for whom higher education has instrumental value. The publication of performance data is conceptualised as a means of making comparisons between institutions on a national basis, judged via select groups of society who have material interests in higher education: the adequacy of students' achievements is to be judged by those who fund and validate higher education, by those who oversee the functioning and operation of the university, by those who have instrumental interest in the university graduate, and not least by the students themselves. However, students and employers are positioned as consumers of higher education, and thus their role in 'public accountability' is to legitimate the utilitarian consumption value of higher education.

This extract also begins to clarify the concept of teaching that has, thus far, remained a vague concept. Here, teaching provides for the nature and value of students' achievements. Thus the relation between teaching and students' achievements becomes that of input and output; the distribution of degree categories are taken as direct correlates of the 'quality' of teaching. The use of output figures as measures of the 'quality' of teaching predicates a causal relation between teaching and learning, ignores the nature of this relation as a process, and presumes a dependent, rather than autonomous learner. The differential between input measures and output measures is considered to reflect the 'quality' of teaching, and constitutes one form of data by which to derive judgements of institutional performance.

5.1.3.2 Higher Education: A New Framework.

Teaching

21 The Government has decided that the most effective way of funding higher education is to provide an element of institutional grant alongside the sum to be provided by differentiated tuition fees. This will; ...

- permit elements of institutional funding to be linked with assessments of quality; (DES 1991:13).

The previous section established that 'quality' has various functions, and ambiguous meanings across a range of concepts and activities concerned with higher education, however it is also a concept that has been stamped with a single set of claims that have

been legitimated by reference to a 'democratic' responsibility with respect to the assertion of public and consumer interests as if these are evidenced, publicly identified and shared needs.

In the present extract 'quality' has become a substantive noun. Whereas it was previously possible to search for a referent, here there appears to be none. The meaning of 'quality' has shifted from a claim concerning the absolute excellence / essential characteristic *of another concept* to an assumption of self-referential, self-evident meaning. The use of 'quality' within the text assumes and enforces a 'fixing' of meaning, and represents the meaning of 'quality' as indicative of something substantive and concrete.

The use of 'quality' in the form of a substantive noun also implies that there is an element to 'quality' that might be assessed, and this use of 'quality' enables the assertion of, and resolution to the claim concerning the 'most effective' means of allocating funds. Here then, 'quality' is associated with material, quantifiable returns, and this reinforces the new idea that there is an objective element to 'quality'. Yet at the same time the common-sense meaning of 'quality' as 'virtue' is productive, its utility being once more to mobilise and legitimate the new funding regime.

Quality Assurance in Teaching

- 58** The prime responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning rests with each individual institution. At the same time there is a need for proper accountability for the substantial public funds invested in

higher education. As part of this, students and employers need improved information about quality if the full benefits of increased competition is to be obtained.

59 There are various aspects of quality assurance in higher education which, for the purposes of this White Paper are defined as follows:

- Quality Control: mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision.
- Quality Audit: external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place ...
- Quality Assessment: external review of, and judgements about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions (DES 1991:13 and 24).

Within bullet 58 'quality' functions as it did in the previous extract: 'quality' is used as a substantive noun. Here, 'quality' represents, and substitutes for a material object about which information might be collected. The function of 'quality' is therefore to enable the claim that information might be collected about that, now concrete rather than abstract, object. The assertion that more information is required by students and employers is contained within in-explicit and emotive claims concerning the requirement for public accountability. In turn, the collection of information about 'quality', as a mechanism of public accountability, disguises the fully contentious idea of competition. 'Competition' is presented within the context of a benign or laudable intention; the careful placement of 'quality' introduces a contentious policy intention with the sleight of a subtle hand.

In bullet 59, 'quality' becomes the object of various management techniques. 'Quality' substitutes for, and represents the otherwise un-named object of the scrutiny that is enabled by technologies, systems and strategies of organisational control. As a symbol of 'virtue', 'quality' also acts to legitimate the assertion of need, means and ends of 'quality assurance. However, 'quality' is *also* used to refer to the 'essential nature', or absolute excellence' of provision; 'quality' is also a concrete phenomenon that might be controlled; and finally, 'quality' is also the descriptor of the value of teaching and learning activities.

Quality Assurance in Teaching

67 There is a common view throughout higher education on the need for externally provided reassurance that the quality control mechanisms within institutions are adequate. Quality is a means of checking that relevant systems and structures within an institution support its key mission.

(DES 1991:26)

This extract is a reworking of the original claim about the need for 'public accountability'. The need for a *externally provided reassurance* is asserted as an overarching consensus, a grand claim that almost appears to suggest desire rather than merely wide support. The use of the word reassurance refers to 'Quality' Assurance'; the use of 'reassurance' is used to substitute for a management technique so that the latter appears as a legitimate, comforting solution to a problem. Here however the problem is no longer conveyed in terms of the activities and substance of higher

education provision, the 'problem' of 'quality' is identified as a necessity to monitor the systems of control.

'Quality' is again a substantive noun; the first use of 'quality' might be read as a substitute for higher education provision, however, the second use of 'quality' identifies it as a monitoring device. 'Quality' infers a 'tool' for making sure that an institution has the correct management structures and procedures in place. 'Quality' is a discursive construct that is used to assert, justify, specify and implement forms of managerial control that emphasise the mechanisation and regularisation of organisational practice and facilitate the introduction of a system of external scrutiny, where judgements *of* 'quality' are defined in terms of management and derived relative to external standards, values and interests

5.1.3.3. Higher Quality and Choice: The Charter for Higher Education

What this charter promises you

If the standard of service you receive is poor, there are steps you can take to get it put right.

Your university or college

You should know in advance how your course will be taught and assessed. You should receive a high standard of teaching and research supervision. This includes effective

management of you learning by teaching and other staff. You should also be given the opportunity to register your views.

(DfE 1993: 3 and 12).

Within the Charter for Higher Education, 'quality' represents the idea of institutional provision of higher education. The Charter implies that it specifies what constitutes both a standard and a high standard of service provision.

This idea of 'quality' constructs the student as 'customer' of a well managed 'teaching and learning' enterprise. The student-customer is assigned consumer rights to a level of expectation concerning standards of the concrete products and services; students' views are conceptualised as customer viewpoints about their relative satisfaction levels concerning provision. The student is affirmed as an 'external interest' or 'external audience', who is linked to an institution of higher education by means of a commercial contract that permits temporary membership.

The Charter's implications for institutional management are framed in guidelines published by the HEQC, (see HEQC 1996a: section 6/3.2 - 'procedures to facilitate registration of views', and 6/4 - 'complaints'). The extract below also emphasises the student's consumer-relation to their institution of higher education.

Part III Quality of the student experience

23. When students decide to enrol on a programme of academic study, they usually come with certain expectations about the programme and with a commitment to devote a significant proportion of their time, energy and money to their studies. In order to meet their expectations, as far as is possible, and to maximise the time and energy they expend, institutions need to consider the quality assurance and control procedures that relate to the student experience.

(HEQC 1994a)

The first use of 'quality' identifies it as a means to conceptualise 'experience' so that this becomes an object of judgement. However the same use of 'quality' implies that actual 'quality' is a measure of relative satisfaction derived from the relation between students' experiences and students' original expectations. 'Quality' infers a standard of student experience, and *also* a judgement relative to that standard.

In the same way, 'experience' is constructed as 'student-experience'; experience is a substantive as opposed to an abstract noun. Like 'quality', 'experience' is conceptualised as a standard, and thus the idea of student-experience transforms into a management objective. Judgements of 'quality', as 'experience' might be brought by students, formulated as an aggregate of the opinions of differentiated individual students. However if the student-experience is also conceptualised as a managerial

objective then the purpose of gathering information about students' views is to indicate satisfaction relative to standards of provision defined in managerial terms.

The student is constructed as a hybrid investor-customer, perhaps a nascent 'stakeholder' in higher education. The idea of the committed student with energy and much at stake undercuts the rhetoric of, but does not diminish the theme of the student as a recipient of services. The new idea of 'student-customer' is associated with traditional ideas of the graduate as a person who has gained in terms of intellectual, cultural and personal development. However contemporary instrumentality is in tension with traditional ideas of individual and social enrichment. The concept of the instrumentally motivated student is the favourable obverse of culturally available ideas and prejudices against the over-privileged and undirected undergraduate. The non-instrumentally motivated student is, in terms of this relationship, devalued further.

The 'student-customer' is symbolic of, and substitutes for government interests. As with the 'public' and 'employers' 'student-customer' is a symbolic standard-bearer, a discursive construct that acts as a proxy for the governmental viewpoint and governmental 'voice'. If managerial performance is tied to specific forms of institutional output, and these are judged in terms of governmental interests and values, then the 'student experience' and 'students' interests' are merely further means of referring to the government's values and interests in the purpose of higher education.

The use of the word 'certain' in the above extract is curious. It constitutes an ambiguous claim of behalf of students that fails to address the question of the nature

and origin of these expectations. A generic notion of 'expectations' fits with the managerial concept of 'student-experience'. However, bullet [2.2] in the extract below suggests an equally generic, yet unambiguous idea of 'expectations' derived from, and a reinforcement of the constructs of 'student-customer' and 'student-customer relationship' to higher education institutions.

5.1.3.5 HEQC Guidelines on Quality Assurance 1996

Section 4: Teaching and Learning

2 Policy Considerations ...

2.2 Teaching and learning will benefit from being informed by: ...

iii) student feedback on the quality of their experiences in relation to the expectations raised by promotional/publicity material and student handbooks ...

2.3 Institutions should specify their approach to maintaining standards in teaching and learning including: ...

iii) defining the responsibilities of students in order that they might optimise the benefits of the education provided.

3 Practical implications ...

3.2 At programme level, consideration should be given to procedures for:

iii) systematically collecting feedback from course teams, students and other interested parties, and using this to improve teaching learning and assessment.

(HEQC 1996b:29-30)

The text infers that students' expectations are a product of marketing materials and guides. The 'quality' of the student experience might be subjected to a calculation where experience minus expectations defines 'satisfaction' levels. 'Quality' denotes the idea of satisfaction as a measurable differential between students' expectations and experiences of higher education institutions. This idea of 'satisfaction' informs theories of Total Quality Management. The further assumption behind this use of 'quality' is that relative satisfaction levels are the responsibility of the service producer and a reflection of misleading marketing or under-performing services. The use of 'quality' implies that 'student satisfaction' is again a managerial objective.

In bullet [2.3], the logic of 'expectations' is contrasted by the introduction of the theme of 'responsibility'. This theme acknowledges the traditional understanding of the student as learner, rather than 'recipient' of services. This is a further examples of dialogical discursive practice, and acknowledges perhaps the academic audience for the policy text.

Assertions and claims about teaching, learning, assessment and the development of teaching reveal that there are two implicit and contrasting concepts of education within this text. The student has individual responsibility for learning, and yet the focus of their responsibility is defined in utilitarian terms as maximum gain from the education provided. The concept of education as provision contradicts the notion of the student as a person who is responsible for their own learning, and this underlines the idea that the students' responsibility is to enhance the benefit of time and money expended within higher education.

Furthermore, the idea that expectations derive from marketing documents signals a concept of education and an educational relationship where teaching is defined by superficial expectations about a service, where the outcome of learning is 'satisfied' expectations and the means to obtain satisfaction a matter of establishing initial expectations and orienting service provision to them. This conflicts with alternative understandings of the nature of expectations as in flux, and transformed through the process of education, a process in which dialogue about expectations is central to that process, rather than oriented to gaining information about satisfaction.

Point [3.2] refers to features that construct a course. Here assessment is viewed as one distinct component of a course, rather than an integral facet of the total teaching and learning activities that realise outcomes of a course. The concept of a course is suggestive of a series of components generic to each discipline, that inter-link to provide education.

Despite the title, and references to varying ideas of teaching and learning, the major interest of this text lies with the managerial arrangements assumed to give rise to teaching and learning. It assumes, rather than addresses the relation between the managerial arrangements advocated and the nature of the processes of teaching and learning. The impact of the proposed arrangements for teaching and learning is less a concern than the nature of the arrangements themselves: 'information', 'specification', 'maintenance', 'definition', 'optimisation', 'systematic'. The emphatic nature of words that imply rigour lends a categorical certainty and neatness; this is a discursive practice that lends support to the governmental idea of what is acceptable in respect of enabling,

maintaining, assuring and assessing the governmental view of the 'essential nature' of higher education.

Section 6: Student Communication and Representation

Introduction

The diversity of the student population means that [students] have very different needs and aspirations. ... Furthermore, since different perspectives on standards and approaches to academic quality exist across subjects, attention to effective communication is required. Communication, here means the creation and use of systems, processes and channels which operate throughout the organisational structure for the exchange of information and ideas concerning quality control, quality assurance mechanisms and their implementation.

1 Communication

1.1 Principles

... Effective communication will include feedback on outcomes so that continuous review and quality enhancement can be promoted.

1.3 In creating effective channels of communication, an institution should give consideration to: ...

- how it regulates and promotes the flow of communication through the channels it has established, to allow and to encourage two-way traffic.

(HEQC 1996a:41)

Initially this extract is concerned to acknowledge divergent views of 'quality'. The concept of divergence is understood as a product and reflection of different categories of student, and also of contesting views across the institution. However the focal object of interest is a form of communication that informs the work of those responsible for maintaining and enhancing the standard of institutional performance. Communication about 'quality' is centred on informing the continual development and review of the institutional management functions.

The emphasis of 'systematic arrangements' construes the purpose and form of 'communication' as documented information. The assumption is that increased flow and quantity of documented information will benefit institutional operations, so long as the flow and production of documented information is orchestrated as a regulated, integrated, cyclical system. Documentation of management systems, procedures, actions and performance measures has been justified as a requirement of accountability: the documentation is necessitated by external inspection.

Within this extract the student is the lynch-pin within attempts to justify communication conceptualised in terms of a bureaucratic system, in which formalised and mechanised routines substitute for dialogue, human relations or participative community.

'Communication' is conceptualised in terms of the operation of formalised procedures for 'two-way' traffic, is beneficial to the institution rather than of direct benefit to the student, and is motivated by, and the subject of national scrutiny, 'Quality Audit':

Quality Assurance

The Quality Assurance Group (QAG) is responsible for scrutinising institutions' quality assurance mechanisms with a view to ensuring public accountability for the maintenance and improvement of academic quality and standards. It undertakes regular audits of the processes by which institutions control the quality of the academic programmes which they deliver themselves ...

Quality Audit

The auditors scrutinise quality assurance procedures used in relation to: the design, monitoring and evaluation of courses and degree programmes; teaching, learning and communications methods; student assessment and degree classification; academic staff; verification and feedback mechanisms; arrangements for ensuring that promotional material is not misleading.

(HEQC 1995:13-14)

'Quality' is a term that substitutes for mechanisms that assure the nature and standard of academic provision. 'Quality' thus becomes available to scrutiny in the form of audit. Furthermore the Quality Audit report is taken into account during 'Quality Assessment' at subject level. In the latter 'quality' substitutes for the nature and standard of subject-level of provision. Thus 'quality' is a double idea, of management and provision, and

both are the object of judgement, where the former is assumed to have determinate relation to the latter:

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Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Key Features

- evidence from HEQC audit;
- subject provider-level internal quality assurance (for example, curriculum or course review, feedback mechanisms) and linkage with institution-wide quality assurance ...

Relationships with

- subject aims and objectives / curriculum development;
- student profile;
- student progression and achievement;
- future plans;
- indicators/measures of effectiveness.

(HEFCE 1995:9)

Moreover, previous ideas of 'quality' as a measure of effectiveness of the management and standard of provision are also available to judgement. The three forms of judgement have implications for institutional 'image'; 'image' functions as a symbol of the relative value of the institution, and provides the means by which institutions compete within the 'quasi'-market of higher education for funds and students.

Student feedback is included within one of the core aspects of provision, and might be included as one 'indicator' of effectiveness, where effectiveness is defined by the various external perspectives met thus far. Student feedback is also considered an essential element of the management of subject provision. Finally, student feedback is considered in generic terms, where the taking into account of students' views is reminiscent of facilitating judgement defined in terms suggested by the Charter for Higher Education:

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... Although the Council has intentionally avoided prescription of the structure and content of self-assessments, it is clear that they will normally be designed around the six core aspects of provision. An analysis of a self-assessment will include consideration of the following generic matters as well as subject specific issues: ...

13. Are the views of students properly taken into account?

(HEFCE 1995:13-14)

5.1.4. Conclusion

Use of 'quality' serves multiple functions, and that this suggests 'quality' is useful for reason of its surface ambiguity. However over the course of both policy development and the work of statutory agencies the use of 'quality' changes. Initially it is used as if it is a diffuse term that is available to and demanding of definition in respect of a particular context. Over time, use of the word rests on the assumption that its meaning

and referents are both widely known and also shared. Yet this latter assumption serves both to obscure the assumptions and intentions of policy at the same time as it cloaks them in a positive rhetoric; 'quality' is used in an elliptical manner in order to interact with the academic community. At the same time use of 'quality' constructs and mobilises further concepts and relations. These refer to, and draw on the concepts and imperatives of a market ideology and suggest a technicist concept of higher education. The social practice of 'quality' harnesses common sense uses of 'quality' and implants these with a new and restricted set of meanings that act within, and act to define the social, educational and institutional contexts of higher education. 'Quality' has been used such that it contains several layers of meaning; these, nevertheless, crystallise on the ideological assumptions and interests of government policy.

The concept of 'quality' does not refer to teaching and learning but to the belief in and activities of management itself. 'Quality' is symbolic of a managerialist strategy that is, nevertheless, constituted by several different forms of management belief. 'Quality' identifies various approaches to management; these range from bureaucratic-rationality, to the market-driven, and to the all encompassing 'cultures' approach. The managerialist assumption is that 'quality' might be measured, judged and controlled. 'Quality' is not a concept available to definition in relation to contesting values and interests but a concept that is 'totalised' according to a single, governmental concept of and purpose for higher education. 'Quality' asserted, enabled, and implemented structures that translated the discursive construct of 'quality' into systems of institutional management and national scrutiny of institutional performance. Judgements of higher education brought in the name of 'quality' must inevitably reflect

the government's politically and ideologically motivated and informed set of interests and values.

'Quality' is a legitimating device that mobilises and implements structures and procedures geared to the reorientation of higher education. From the perspective of a critical analysis, 'quality' also serves to symbolise this attempt by government to gain leverage over the organisational practices and purposes of higher education institutions and to further its own ideological and political ends.

5.2. The management of 'quality'; from financial expediency to fiscal policy

Efficiency, accountability and performance: In Chapter Four, Section One I argued that the overriding ambitions of the public sector reform programme were to enhance the 'performance' and 'efficiency' of the sector. Policy developed from an interest in holding professional groups to account for their efficient use of public funds, towards increasingly overt attempts to gain leverage over the actual products of their work. In order to realise the goals of cost reduction and reorientation it was assumed necessary to restrict professional autonomy and power. In respect of higher education, policy assumed and asserted a tight relationship between the performance of institutions, professionals, students and national economic success; the reform of higher education extended the emphasis of policy from financial expediency to that of fiscal policy.

The meaning of ‘quality’ in higher education: Each wave of policy development served particular historical political contexts (Pollitt 1993); policy developed as a piecemeal of internally contradictory strategies. Pollitt that the reform programme encompasses a hybrid form of centralised, bureaucratic-rational control *and* commercial management strategies. In my discourse analysis I have shown that ‘quality’ has always played a key-role. Rather than a purely market-driven concept, it represents the whole scope of policy making from the time of the Jarratt Committee. Commercial ideas of management are only one layer of meaning within the overall concept of ‘quality’.

The discourse analysis concludes that the concept of ‘quality’ is informed by, and refers to, the assumptions and intentions of both bureaucratic-rational and market-driven concepts of management. The concept ‘quality’ refers to the assumed internal efficiency of management and instrumental value of higher education *products* in the external market place.

‘Quality’ is,

associated with increased control over the public sector labour process. One can understand this in terms of: a) how the rhetoric of quality was used as a legitimisation device to justify increased managerial control, and b) how actual mechanisms of quality improvement, such as decentralisation, ‘customer care’ and performance measurement, acted in themselves as ‘technologies’ of control (Kirkpatrick and Martinez-Lucio 1995:9).

'Quality' is symbolic of higher education reform. It identifies the structures, technologies and ideologies of management introduced to increase external, governmental, influence on the sector, its institutions and their professionals. 'Quality' identifies and encompasses the ideas of 'efficiency', 'accountability' and 'performance', and the agenda in which they are located. 'Quality' is instrumental to the reform agenda; it is a powerful political tool used to introduce, legitimate and implement both need, and means, of reform.

'Quality' played an important symbolic role within the transition from Thatcher to Major governments. One expression of this is the 'Citizens' Charter movement', in which 'quality' is a key term (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio 1995, Pollitt 1993, Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). 'Quality' is used to translate the concept of citizens' rights into a neo-liberal idea of choice and empowerment:

Choice is seen as essential to the empowerment of citizens as consumers, and the effective operation of markets for public service (Walsh 1995:93).

Thus Higher Quality and Choice: The Charter for Higher Education (DfE 1993), is part of a, 'long march through government services, introducing market processes in order to break down traditional approaches to management and organisation. ... The aim is to introduce the sort of total quality management approaches that have been developed in the private sector. The language of the new public management is one of standards, quality, empowerment and customers, in contrast to the language of professional bureaucracy' (Walsh 1995:82).

'Quality' initiatives encompass varied forms of commercial management practice that, nevertheless, share a set of common interests and assumptions. These are:

- the low-cost production of standard, dependable products;
- the stimulation of continuous improvement by encouraging or requiring employees to take personal responsibility for production;
- a focus on performance, communication, creativity and participative teamwork; and,
- a concept of external and internal customer satisfaction

(extrapolated from Kirkpatrick and Martinez-Lucio 1995, Wilkinson and Willmott 1995).

As in many other public sector services, the products and processes of higher education are not available to measurement through the use of statistical performance indicators. This implies that performance measurement must make use of proxies for higher educational processes and products of higher education. In Walsh's view (1995:94), management is one example of such a substitute:

Since performance cannot be demonstrated, the nature of the management system becomes, itself, the mark of effectiveness. Ideas in good currency, such as customer sensitivity, are taken up as a method of signalling managerial effectiveness.

Walsh argues that 'quality' also identifies the separation of politics and management at the same time as it witnesses the emergence of the 'evaluative state' (p.101). Within

the evaluative state, increased and centralised control is both obscured, and also exercised at a distance.

Wilkinson and Willmott (1995) claim that the commercial sector's enthusiasm for 'quality' initiatives was prompted by a shift away from bureaucratic-rational, hierarchical, and 'management-heavy' forms of work organisation. Yet 'quality' initiatives are focused on compliance and entail monitoring and control techniques 'deployed in the service of values and interests held by those occupying positions of governance within corporate hierarchies' (Reed 1995:46). These intend the same ends as traditional bureaucratic-rational forms of control, 'with the difference that workers do it to themselves' (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995:11). Whilst 'quality' is 'a seductive and slippery philosophy of management' (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995:1), it is also, 'a form of organisational governance based on an assumed technical and social expertise grounded in statistical and informational systems, and [a form of] socio-cultural management that permits 'control at a distance' to be routinely achieved' (Reed 1995: 48).

'Quality' as outcome of contest between academic, political and market interests:

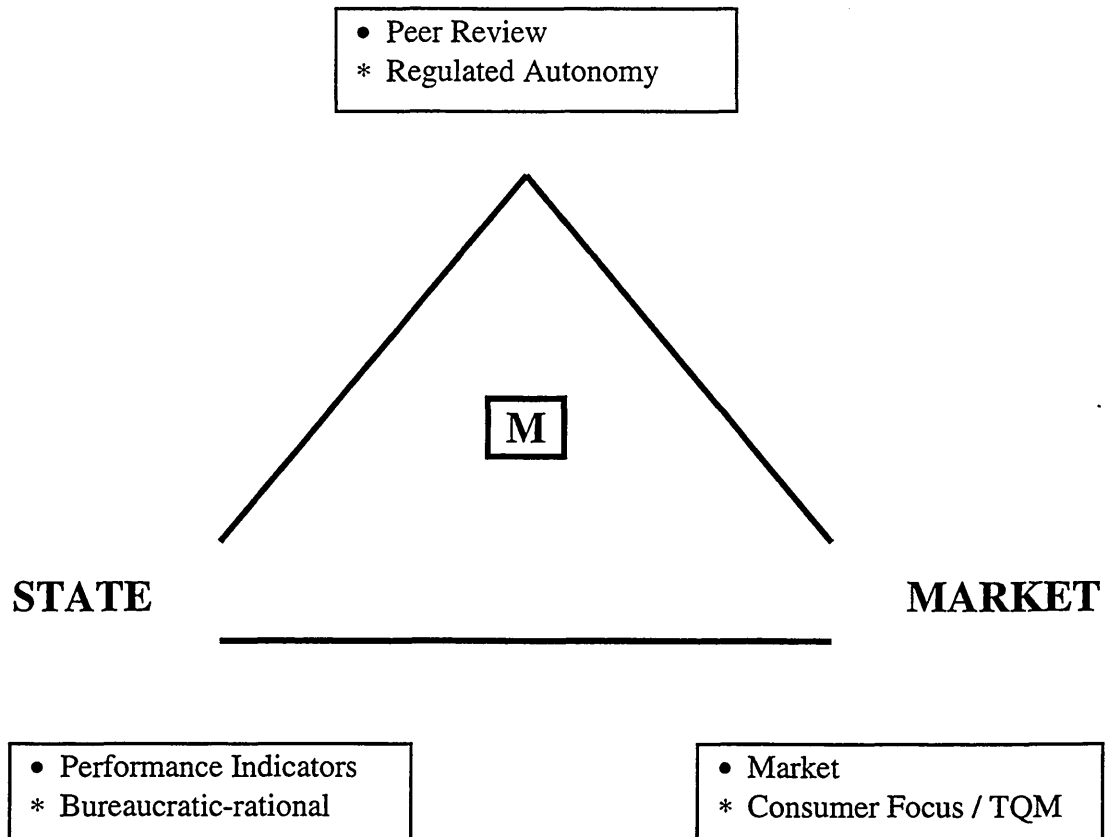
Policy ambitions are subject to mediation during the stage of implementation owing to the actions/resistance at localised institutional or professional/occupational levels.

Policy is subject to transformation within the 'context of influence' (Ball 1994) as a result of the 'messy complexities' and 'contested realities' that characterise the context in which practice takes place (Vidovich and Porter 1997).

although 'quality' may be understood as a 'governmental technology' - and as such may be associated with ever more intrusive systems of surveillance - the reality is that top-down efforts to introduce change and increase managerial control are mediated at the micro-organisational level. Public organisations, like any other, are 'negotiated-orders' in which there exists ample scope to interpret top-down initiatives, transform them and use them for alternative purposes (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio 1995:9-10, see also Martens 1996).

Barnett (1992a) argues that, in respect of higher education, the concept and implications of 'quality' are mediated through the relative power of the forces of market, state and academic community. He uses Burton Clark's model to explain this. In Figure three I use this model to extrapolate on Barnett's extrapolation on Burton Clark's model.

ACADEMIC COMMUNITY



Key:

Each box represents one of the forces identified by Burton Clark.

Each bullet refers to the methodological approach to 'quality' as presented by Barnett.

Each star refers to one approach to management; the character and form of management can be indicated by 'M'.

Figure Three: Forces of Influence on Higher Education

In Barnett's view the character of performance assessment defines what 'quality' means, and represents the outcome of contest between the three forces. 'Quality' might thus be located and illustrated at a point within the triangle. The model also implies that in any given national context, the relationship between market, state and the academic community will influence the character and assumed purpose of higher education system. This can also be identified and plotted within the triangle.

The approach to performance measurement also reflects a particular concept of management. Thus the form and character of management might also be interpreted as indicative of the relative power of academic, state and market competing interests in the organisation, work processes and work outcomes of higher education. This can also be plotted within the triangle.

5.3 A Debate¹

It wasn't any particular point of view that outraged him so much as the idea that Quality should be subordinated to any point of view. The intellectual process was forcing Quality into its servitude, prostituting it. ... What they smack their lips on is the putrescence of something they long ago killed.

The identification, the assessment and the improvement of quality cannot be conducted purely as a technical exercise. Matters of judgement, of taste and of a sense of rightness inescapably come into play.

And who knows, (nobody can say with certainty), perhaps man's sole purpose in this world consists in this uninterrupted process of attainment, or in other words in living, and not specifically in the goal, which of course must be something like twice two is four, that is a formula; but after all, twice two is not life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death.

'Improving', 'quality', 'higher' and 'education' itself are all value terms; none is merely descriptive. They point to an aiming in a conscious direction and to some end, and are oriented by a set of values. We cannot sensibly employ the term 'quality' in a value-free way. Its use obliges us to take up a value stance, that of declaring in favour of some worthwhile way of doing things. It is that sense, perhaps tacit and unformulated, of there being some kind of approved way of going on, that gives point to this terminology.

By subtracting Quality from a picture of the world as we know it, he'd revealed a magnitude of importance of this term he hadn't known was there. The world *can* function without it, but life would be so dull as to be hardly worth living. In fact it wouldn't be worth living. The term *worth* is a Quality term. Life would just be living without any values at all.

¹ Extracts:

[1] and [5] Pirsig (1976);

[2] and [4] Barnett (1992:212); and

[3] Notes from Underground, Fyodor Dostoyevsky; trns. Coulson, J. (1972) London: Penguin.

5.4. The Quality Debate

'Quality' is the catalyst for intense debate within higher education. Barnett (1992a:5) identifies a 'babel of voices'. In King's view (1992:39) this is 'the politics of quality', the substance of which is at least, 'considerable rhetorical enthusiasm' (Shore & Selwyn 1998:155). Although the inherent ambiguity of 'quality' might justify the assertion that 'it is a waste of time to try to define quality precisely' (Vroeijenstijn 1995:25), such ambiguity has also lent 'quality' great value. Thus whilst 'quality is just the focal point around which a lot of intellectual furniture is getting rearranged' (Pirsig 1976:118) 'quality' has developed as a 'slippery philosophy of management' at the same time as it has been reinforced as a label for a 'self-evident good' (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). It is therefore a *valuable* use of time to examine the precise use and utility of 'quality' in higher education.

However much literature within the 'quality debate' fails to grapple with this question adequately. 'Quality' raises and implies a managerialist agenda; higher education literature examines 'quality' from within the managerial paradigm of which 'quality' is symbol and in which it is a tool. The scope of this debate means that critique is beyond the scope of this chapter. However as brief illustration of the precise interests of the literature: Booth (1992) and Wagner (1993) examine the implications of management and performance measurement for the *system* of higher education. Alderman (1996) and Doherty (1994) dispute the mechanisms used to measure performance. Tannock and Burge (1992), Vroeijenstijn (1995) and Watson (1995b) respond pragmatically to the demand for mechanisms of performance assessment by offering their own practical

frameworks. Sizer (1988) and Watson (1995a) examine the demands quality assessment makes on institutional managers, whilst some raise concerns over the consequences of quality assessment for individuals: c.f. Shore and Roberts (1995), or for teaching: (Elton 1987). There is also a growing field of interest in which 'quality' is considered in respect of Total Quality Management theory, for example: Fry (1995), Ho (1995), Reavill (1997), Sallis (n.d.) Solomon (1993) and Weller (1996).

Thus whilst 'quality' is examined in terms of the implications *for management* of various managerial concepts of 'quality' (e.g. Green 1994), the dominant paradigm receives little critical attention.

Management takes place within, and in terms of, a context; it is both contingent on, and has implications for the nature of higher education. The management paradigm assumes a technicist concept of higher education. Yet if discussion of 'quality' revolves around the systems, processes and techniques implied by this concept critical assessment management in terms of its educational implications is side-stepped. Moreover, alternative ideas of higher education and their relationship with management also remain unexamined. These are then devalued.

Rare exceptions to this are provided by Barnett (1990, 1992a, 1994). Cuthbert (1988) also provides an analysis that separates, assesses and questions the relationship between various concepts of higher education, management and 'quality'.

Defining ‘quality’: In discussion of a reference to Pirsig (1976) in an essay What the hell is ‘quality’? by Sir Christopher Ballⁱ. Elton (1986) claims that Ball’s definition as ‘fitness for purpose’ is ‘superficial’ and ‘simplistic’. Yet he also thinks it understandable, given that ‘Pirsig is a philosopher, while Ball is a man of action who wants to use quality as a planning tool; to establish priorities, allocate resources, open and close courses, and close departments and institutions’. Elton argues that herein lay ‘the most serious lapse in the logic of the argument, for the question whether quality is an appropriate tool for these purposes is never even raised’ (Elton 1986:83-84).

Subsequent literature concerning definitions of ‘quality’ picks up on the references to Pirsig’s novel made by Ball and Elton. These invariably cite:

But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have is, it all goes poof! There’s nothing to talk about (Pirsig 1976:178).

Elton interprets the meaning of ‘quality’ within Pirsig’s novel as ‘excellence’ or, ‘the outcome of a sense of duty towards oneself’. Yet the successive authors’ interests usually mirror those of Ball, rather than Elton. They cite from Pirsig (1976) to introduce ‘quality’ as a problematic idea. Interests quickly turn, however to the managerial concept of ‘quality’ and the agenda in which it is implicated. Authors thus discuss how ‘quality’ might be identified, measured, assessed and managed.

This represents a break in analysis of ‘quality’; it is an analytic jump and a hole in the argument. The break in analysis is the point at which discussions slip *into* the

contemporary, contextual perspective on 'quality'; it is the point at which analysis reproduces and reinforces the dominant concepts of both management and higher education. The break implies that assertive analysis of 'quality' in respect of its role within, and relation to, the policy context is pushed to one side. At the same time, the break represents the point at which attention shifts away from consideration of alternative concepts of 'quality' in higher education, towards a focus on the practical considerations concerning the use of 'quality' as a tool of management. Examples of this 'break' are given below. The break is indicated by [☞]

The present debate about quality [features a] wide variety of perspectives that are being drawn into the debate, whether from philosophy, politics, sociology or economics ... [☞] This paper aims to examine notions of quality in current use within the two contexts of business and higher education, so as to clarify the opportunities and difficulties which exist in making quality an organising principle for higher education in the 1990s and beyond (Middlehurst 1992:20-21).

Definitions can make tedious beginnings but in this case they are necessary. Quality, quality assurance and, indeed teaching itself are all open to a range of interpretations. So one purpose of this chapter will be to look at different ways in which the terms have been used. [☞] A second aim is to identify some of the key issues in quality assurance for quality teaching. ... Standards of some kind are essential for quality assurance. ... An important idea is that the consumers of a product or service should be the ultimate arbiters of quality. From this stems the idea that quality is that which satisfies a consumer or customer (Ellis 1993:3).

Quality is an important issue in higher education in the United Kingdom. For the participants in the education process it always has been important although frequently taken for granted. ... Quality also matters to the government and its agencies. ... [↷] The linking of quality with cost effectiveness has given new urgency to the analysis of quality in higher education. So for a variety of reasons, quality matters (Harvey 1992:9)ⁱⁱ.

Baume (1990) describes institutional responses to government pressure to define 'quality' as a 'ritual dance':

as better burglar alarms beget better burglars, so better answers and claims beget more sophisticated questions and challenges. After a decent interval we shall be asked what we mean by quality, by excellence. There will be huffing and puffing, reluctance and refusal, but we shall do it. We shall define. ... And, in time we shall clarify. Inevitably, ... our clarified claims to quality will eventually become capable of being tested. And tested they will be (Baume 1990:27).

Stronach (1999:184) characterises educational effectiveness as a

'discourse with rickety connections between its parts - the educational and the economic, part and whole, a creature of moral panics and policy hysterias, full of false comparisons and non-sequitors - and yet it is considerably more powerful than any other current educational discourse'.

The discursive construct 'quality', and the debate surrounding it, share similar features.

5.5. Quality, values and processes (in higher education)

It is interesting that *none* of these discussions of, and citations from Pirsig (1976) reference the novel in its full form. In full form, the novel is entitled. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values.

Selective citation and reference misrepresents the meaning of 'quality' within the novel, at the same time as the argument in which 'quality' is used, and the principles that underpin the argument, remain unacknowledged and unexamined.

The novel uses 'quality' to develop an argument in which 'quality' comes to be understood as a concept that refers to values. The argument is that values are not identified through definition; they are realised through a continual process of questioning and debate, and through their expression in action, shared belief and thought. The subtext is that values offer a unifying force for social cohesion:

And yet here was Quality; a tiny, almost unnoticeable fault line; a line of illogic in our concept of the universe; and you tapped it, and the whole universe came apart, so neatly it was almost unbelievable. ... Phaedrus wrote, with some beginning awareness that he was involved in a strange kind of intellectual suicide, 'Squareness may be succinctly and yet thoroughly defined as an inability to see

quality before it's been intellectually defined, that is, before it gets all chopped up into words. . . . We have proved that quality, though undefined, exists. Its existence can be seen empirically in the classroom, and can be demonstrated logically by showing that a world without it cannot exist as we know it. ... I think the referent of a term that can split a world into hip and square, classic and romantic, technological and humanistic, is an entity that can unite a world already split along these lines into one (Pirsig 1976:213).

Margetson (1997) echoes Pirsig's critique of the urge to reach 'definitions' by arguing that concern with 'quality' is largely focused on secondary (technical-political), rather than primary (conceptual-moral) concerns. Moreover moral concerns become means of legitimating techniques:

technological development, harnessed to economic growth and with the political system in the driving seat trying to nudge the whole enterprise one way or another, inevitably brings with it a preoccupation with technical matters. The understanding of quality, ways of assessing it, and associated ethical justifications could hardly be expected to escape these influences (Margetson 1997:125).

Like Barnett (1992a, 1992b) Margetson concludes that the political climate for 'quality' is predicated on technicist conception of the relation between human beings and their world, and that the technicist world-view is expressed as attitudes and actions informed by a materialist, 'calculative mentality'. He argues that, from the technicist world-view, if human values cannot be identified or realised in material or economic-utilitarian

terms they are devalued as concept and rejected for reason of their lack of relevance or importance. Thus the technicist world-view eliminates the possibility of publicly shared values.

He asserts that the technicist world-view also rejects a perspective in which higher education is viewed as constituted by the processes and practices of debating and realising academic values. From this perspective the processes and associated practices form both the substance and challenge of academic work; they are phenomena for which academics take responsibility at a moral and ethical level, and for which they should be held to account.

Walsh takes the view that managerial evaluation and performance assessment in the public sector is problematic because 'we are concerned with basic human values, rather than the attempt to develop effective comparative measures of material attributes' (Walsh 1994:54). He argues the imperative is to develop a political process in which contest concerning value-positions, and debate about the actions implied by respective positions, are central. Both the politics, and the evaluation of 'complex human systems' such as public sector services require practical wisdom and the exercise of good judgement rather than the intrusion and assertion of managerialist ideologies, discourses and technologies.

5.6. Conclusion

Discussions concerning 'quality' in higher education lack acknowledgement of, and public debate about the values that inform the process of teaching and learning in higher education. These are the values that are realised within higher education, are reflected in graduate and will be put to use within society. They might well reflect the values that underpin 'quality' in professional work: excellence as the outcome of the duty towards one's own development (Elton 1986).

Any evaluation of higher education must reflect the nature of the professional activity of teaching and the process of learning in higher education. Both are processes of continual self-development and necessitate debate and engagement between student and lecturer. If higher education is transformative of the person, then the process of higher education must also be informed by, and develop a capacity for critical self-reflection and action (Schoen 1983). If higher education enhances society's capacity for societal transformation, then the educational process must also be informed by, and develop a student's capacity for self-critical learning, and critical engagement with knowledge/action (c.f. Barnett 1990:168-174, 1994:185). The process of higher education will be one that involves critical debate about the values represented by, and realised in different forms of knowledge and action, and will develop a capacity for transforming knowledge and action within society (c.f. Barnett 1997).

The argument, that the evaluation of 'quality' in higher education must complement the nature and fundamental principles of higher education is an issue of greater significance

than the 'vital' matter of choosing an adequate methodological approach (c.f. Kells 1992), the 'essential' question of using a methodology that elicits information that is also important to the participants (c.f. Johannessen et al 1997, Snape 1993) and the equally 'essential' question of the benefits that can accrue to participants as a result of particular processes of evaluation (c.f. Ahgren-Lange et al 1993, Saarinen 1995). If evaluation is to harness features of higher education as a means of appraising 'quality', then the purpose of the evaluation will augment the professional's duty to continuous development towards excellence; it will augment the student's capacity for self-critical learning and critical engagement; and it will also allow for public debate concerning the values and processes of higher education and the graduate's contribution to society.

That is, the evaluation will facilitate collaborative and critical enquiry, and participative debate between students, their professional academic teachers and the external public, including employers and politicians. The evaluation will be in microcosm what lies at the basis of the concept of 'quality' when understood as an expression of values.

However the proliferation of technically or managerially focused debate concerning 'quality' in higher education fosters systems and micro-technologies of 'quality' assessment and 'quality' assurance that reflect, rather than foster critical appraisal of, oppose, or challenge the dominant concepts of 'quality' and 'higher education'.

ⁱ Ball, C (1985) What the hell is quality?; in *Fitness for Purpose*. Guildford: SRHE/NFER, Nelson; pp.96-102.

ⁱⁱ Despite his own concerns for an educational concept of 'quality', Harvey's major interest within this publication is to address the ways in which quality might be assessed. Thus the emphasis and tone of the publication is a managerial, and often marketised, individualist perspective on 'quality'. Later Harvey (1995), Harvey and Knight (1996) he develops a view of 'quality' that places greater emphasis on student empowerment and student learning.

SECTION ONE: CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: A Brief Summary of Policy Interests and Goals

Student feedback is contextualised by, is a symbol of and is a tool within the government reform programme. Analysis of texts issued by government and statutory agencies, of debate within the field of higher education policy, research and practice, and of other (more) critical texts, has demonstrated that the agenda is narrowly focused.

It is however pursued by government through a complex and often conflicting and contradictory set of discourses, structural changes and instrumental technologies. These are both ideologically informed, predicate technical-rational and market-driven concepts of higher educational processes and purposes, and target a broad range of practices and subjects in higher education. They attempt greater leverage and direct control over higher educational professionals, their work, organisation and purposes.

It has been suggested that the discourses, structures and technologies that seek external leverage and control are objects of contest and resistance. It has been further suggested that implementation is likely to be mediated and subject to further confusion and distortion at local levels.

The agenda pursues the following six sets of assumptions, interests and ambitions:

- efficient and effective management;
- a reorientation of academic cultures, practices and values;
- the redefinition and control of 'professionalism' in higher education;
- the representation and empowerment of the student as 'customer';
- a reorientation of the purpose of (the) higher education (curriculum);
- the development of professional practice in teaching in higher education;

Student feedback is instrumental to the introduction, legitimation and implementation of these ends.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER ONE

Efficient and Effective Management

Introduction

This chapter argues that students' and lecturers' perceptions of the form and purpose of student feedback are compatible with the concepts of organisation and control that are dominant in texts issued by statutory agencies.

First, I show that these documents conceptualise student feedback as a set of formal systematised procedures for 'communicating' with students. This concept of 'communication' fits within a theoretical analysis of the university as a bureaucratic-rational organisation. Second, I discuss lecturers' perceptions of student feedback as an experience of 'formalisation', and I consider what this means. Third I describe how students perceive student feedback as an example of routine bureaucracy, typical of institutional life in general. Fourth, I consider formalisation and routine bureaucracy in terms of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness': both students and lecturers attempt to minimise the time and administrative resources required. Fifth, I discuss students' and lecturers' ideas of the origins of 'formalisation' and 'bureaucracy'. The chapter concludes that students and lecturers perceive student feedback to be a manifestation of what is assumed 'efficient' and 'effective' within policy and statutory texts. However, they find this form of 'communication' problematic.

1.1. Quality Assurance: Efficient and Effective Organisation and Control.

Guidelines on Quality Assurance (HEQC 1994a:12) introduces quality assurance as a set of practices focused on the nature of students' experiences in higher education.

'Quality' is presented in three ways: as the difference between a student's expectations and experience of educational provision; as the returns expected on the student's personal investments and commitment; and as a question of the comparability of standards obtained across the institution:

When students decide to enrol on a programme of academic study, they usually come with certain expectations about the programme and with a commitment to devote a significant proportion of their time, energy and money to their studies. In order to meet their expectations, as far as is possible, and to maximise the time and energy they expend, institutions need to consider the quality assurance and control procedures that relate to the student experience [- defined as relating to, inter alia,] the quality of teaching and learning; the evaluation of programmes and of teaching and learning; staff appointment, training, development and appraisal ... An institution will wish to ensure that all approaches to teaching/learning are scrutinised appropriately through its quality assurance and control systems in order to ensure the comparability of standards and the quality of the student experience.

Here, student feedback is conceptualised as a tool of quality assurance and control: it is a means to generate information that might then be scrutinised by institutional

managers. Managers might use this information for comparative analysis of standards obtained across the institution, or for analysis of what is taken to be the student's expectation of both the institution and their own experience within it.

Guidelines on Quality Assurance (HEQC 1996a:30-32) conceptualises 'good practice' in quality assurance as:

[the existence of] procedures for ... iii) systematically collecting feedback from course teams, students and other interested parties, and using this to improve teaching, learning and assessment; ... [where] formal consideration of student feedback is used to develop the quality of the students' experience; ... when staff ... make effective use of feedback from students and peers in reflecting upon their own practice as teachers and in further pursuing their professional development; ... [and] when students ... give constructive feedback on their perceptions of the quality of their learning experience.

Documents issued by the HEQC make both explicit and implicit connections between student feedback and a concept of 'communication'. The 'communication' that student feedback facilitates is conceptualised as a system of procedures, processes and channels; these mirror and construct the structure of the organisation. The concept of the university-organisation is a set of mechanisms that articulate and constitute 'structure', 'process' and 'organisation':

Section 6: Student Communication and Representation

... Communication, here means the creation and use of systems, processes and channels which operate throughout the organisational structure for the exchange of information and ideas concerning quality control, quality assurance mechanisms and their implementation. ... In creating effective channels of communication, an institution should give consideration to

- the balance between formal, often documentary-based, communication systems and informal, often oral systems;
- how it regulates and promotes the flow of communication through the channels it has established, to allow and to encourage two-way traffic (HEQC 1996a:41).

Communication: The concept of 'communication' is configured such that it is compatible with an idea of the university as a 'bureaucratic-rational' organisation (c.f. Miller 1995:98). Miller says that within this form of organisation, a system of procedures is assumed effective in structuring and organising human activity through the specification of hierarchical command and control processes and techniques. Formal, explicit and documented means of regulation are legitimate when they are requirements devised by those with instituted authority.

The university-organisation: The idea of the university implied by this concept of 'communication' is impersonal, and reliant on formalised, explicit, and technical control structures, procedures and processes. The bureaucratic-rational concept of

'communication' stands in tension with an understanding of communication as a phenomenon that is a socially-contingent and constituting process. The idea of university implied by this contrasting concept of 'communication' is an organisation structured by, and realised through, social or educational processes; these processes are grounded on relations, contact and interaction between *people*: the individuals and groups who engage and operate within each institutional context.

In the following extract, 'communication' is configured as a loose, in-explicit and socially contingent processes. Yet this alternative concept of 'communication' is presented as a problem. The solution identified is greater formalisation and clarification of procedures and responsibilities:

The Responsibilities of Individual Faculty Members

It was frequently reported that institutions relied to a large extent on a positive and responsive community culture to enable active and effective feedback. This often meant the availability of individual faculty members, for example, through 'open-door' policies, to receive students and take action on issues raised. However this led to problems in terms of effective and timely response to informal communications. Even where formalised arrangements for feedback existed, it was noted that responsibilities for subsequent quality improvement might require clarification (HEQC 1996b:54).

Student Feedback in context. The internal and the external: Given the dominant and favoured concept of 'communication', the imperative for institutional management

is the development of a form of student feedback that can be ‘systematically organised on an institution-wide basis’ (HEQC 1996b:10), monitored, documented and ultimately produced as evidence of ‘good practice’ in respect of institutional organisation, control and management during external inspection through Quality Audit and Quality

Assessment:

Quality Audit

The auditors scrutinise quality assurance procedures used in relation to: the design, monitoring and evaluation of courses and degree programmes; teaching, learning and communications methods; student assessment and degree classification; academic staff; verification and feedback mechanisms (HEQC 1995:3).

Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Key Features

- evidence from HEQC audit;
- subject provider-level internal quality assurance (for example, curriculum or course review, feedback mechanisms) and linkage with institution-wide quality assurance ...

Relationships with: ...

- indicators/measures of effectiveness (HEFCE 1995:20).

‘Good practice’ in effective quality assurance and control is represented as a bureaucratic-rational structure. Organisation is based on, realised as, and articulated by clarified, formalised, documented and systematic institution-wide procedures. Student

feedback is one of these procedures; it is evidenced and affirmed in the form of *documented official policy*. Student feedback is also a procedure that *generates* documented information; this then stands as evidence of the structure and operation of documented policy. The documented information that student feedback generates can be dealt with on a formal, rational, structural/procedural level. Thus student feedback is conceptualised as a *manifestation* of assumed organisational efficiency and management efficacy. It is expected to *realise* effective and efficient control and enhancement of the university's provision of teaching, learning, programmes of study and professional development and of the university's success in maximising the student's learning and experience. Student feedback is 'communication' that is oriented to internal organisational management purposes, and serves externally defined objectives.

1.2. Lecturers' perceptions of student feedback: the 'formalisation' of departmental procedures and the refinement of techniques.

Formality and formalisation: During the interviews, I asked participants whether they had experienced a means of gathering students' views about teaching and learning. All had designed or been participant to one or more different forms of student feedback activities. One major theme in the discussion of what defines the concept of student feedback was the idea of '*formality*' and the process of '*formalisation*'; lecturers' descriptions of these ideas and processes often echo the imperatives consequent on the assumptions about 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' contained within statutory texts. For

example:

Lecturer [13]: Of course student feedback takes all sorts of forms, from the informal through to the much more formalised. ... You bump into people in the corridor and you sort of get, "Well how is it going?", or, "So and so's not very good". So all these things, they are ways that something can get back to staff. Now of course the personal tutorial group is fairly structured, with regular meetings in the first year. We have other more formal forms of feedback. We have questionnaires which we give out at the end of the set of lectures. Ideally we ought to formalise analysis of these, so that when we are looking, when we have got the things on a spreadsheet, as part of the teaching quality, we ought to say, "Well you didn't get a very good score there", or, "They've moaned about this and about that, are you putting it right for next year?". We ought to check that. It hasn't happened so far. It might happen this summer - we've got the quality assessment coming round. We ought to do it. ... I think that across the faculty we've had a history of- What teaching quality there has been has been based on the good will of committed members of staff. Where we've been weak is in the written formal procedures for, you know, for getting feedback. We've probably had members of staff in each department who have been very willing to mix with the students and get informal feedback in that way. We perhaps haven't had the formal processes in place. So I think what we are seeing is the formalisation of practices which have worked quite well informally in the past, but they're being put on a more formal basis.

That lecturer views 'informal' practices as those that are not documented as departmental procedure; the process of 'formalisation' involves official sanction of specific student feedback procedures. Official sanction is not merely an act of legitimisation; it is a process of materialisation - as if making the existing yet intangible practices somehow 'real'.

Informality: 'Formalisation' transforms 'communication' from a socially contingent process to a document-based set of procedures and tools. Most often the 'formal' method was the student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ)ⁱ. 'Formal' student feedback was often contrasted with alternatives - usually methods that the lecturer had devised individually. Lecturers frequently described their own methods as 'informal' in order to differentiate between these and the officially sanctioned methods. These official methods were generally seen as having been imposed.

Lecturer [11]: In psychology by the way, they are dead against them. [The HOD] says that they have no theoretical basis whatsoever, and they are a total waste of time, ... and they just do them because they are imposed. So there is your answer to why we do them. We've got to do them, now.

The term 'informal' appeared to be a tacit indication that their own methods were not recognised within, or considered sufficient to satisfy, departmental/institutional regulations. 'Informality' designates what is not legitimate or 'officially' acceptable. Yet 'informality' is not necessarily a term that implies the lecturer views their own methods as less valuable or less valid means of eliciting information from students:

Rachel: Have you designed this feedback system yourself?

Lecturer [10]: You mean me personally? No, no, no, no. The idea is that we use a standard one. In [one of my own modules] when we do this extra one which we did design ourselves, we have to do that over and on top of the standard one, which is a sort of one which has been

handed down from on high. ... The one we did with [our own course] we designed ourselves, but it's based really on, as a sort of framework for discussion, rather than necessarily a form in itself. ... They have 20 seminars throughout the year, and they talk about each one and what they got out of it and what they enjoyed about it. So that's a much more serious one, and because it's done in a seminar form we can talk back and explain why we didn't do it one way, and why we chose to do it another way, and it's a much more 2 way process ... What we do for [this course], where we spend a 2 hour session talking to students, is incredibly useful.

In the next extract, the SEQ is, again, contrasted with the idea of 'informality'.

'Informal' methods are viewed as impromptu opportunities for moments of comment; such opportunities are contingent on social relationships and interactions:

Rachel: What made you aware that there was a problem with the module?

Lecturer [4]: Both formal and informal student feedback, and gut feelings. ... As a department ... every module has one of these pro-formas, a computer multiple-choice thing. ... On some of the courses [I learn about how my teaching is perceived] purely on that pro-forma. But on some of the courses it is run by such a small cohort of staff, that we actually know the students. ... They see us often enough and in different environments, a lecture, a tutorial, a practical class. So they know us, they can give us informal, 'spur of the moment' feedback.

The construction of the bureaucratic-rational organisation: Previous extracts contain expressions of perceived top-down pressures from institutional management. 'Formalisation' and 'formality' are ideas associated with the imposition of procedures

that are defined and sanctioned at a higher level of organisation. Lecturers also described 'formal' methods of student feedback in terms of the routines and channels necessary to process the SEQ within their respective departments. In this respect, student feedback is conceptualised as a range of exercises involved with gathering, processing, presenting analyses of, and acting on, documented information. Thus 'formalisation' also denotes a process of constructing clarified and explicit routines.

Lecturer [2]: Well we as a department we hand out questionnaires and things to get student feedback on our courses. ... At the moment it will be discussed, albeit briefly perhaps, at the Teaching Committee of the department. ... I see the sort of numerical scores for all the courses. ... On my own courses I get these written comments as well ... they're all automatically distributed by the person who collates all the information. ... Although we do get numbers back, there is no formal ranking comparison made; there have been attempts to combine various of the numbers into some sort of graphical format just to give an overview, but we've actually abandoned those as not telling use anything very much. ... [The results] have come up at staff/student committees when courses haven't done so well ... or through the appraisal system, ... between the appraiser and the person concerned.

Lecturer [9]: The results are analysed ... and they get put up on the notice board, so students can see what they are, if they want to. ... You can produce sort of bar charts and things and say, if they are all bouncing up high, "Oh well yes we're going along all right". ... The results of the questionnaire go to Teaching Committee. ... Well, they get debated in Teaching Committee and they also get debated in the Staff/Student committee. And recommendations from both these committees should then come back to the departmental staff meeting.

Rachel: Recommendations about?

Lecturer [9]: What should be done, in particular instances. That then- I mean it does get incorporated into general, err, course development.

The newly routine exercises in dealing with documented information generate new channels and articulate established channels of organisation and procedure. These construct an organisational framework in the department, as well as articulating various existing departmental functions. The routinisation is a necessary aspect of 'formalisation'; routines facilitate the processes of dealing with documented information.

'Formalisation' is a product of the particular imperatives implied by the concepts and agenda of 'communication' as set out in statutory texts. Some lecturers considered that these newly 'formal' procedures, routines, channels and structures were necessary because it was important to be 'seen' to be doing something. Student feedback is both object and medium of observation: student feedback needs to be seen to happen; and observation will focus both on the processing of the activity *and* the response to student feedback results. The question, of who the 'observer' is, is ambiguous. In the next extract the observer is assumed to be the student. However the motivation for ensuring students' satisfaction with, and participation in, student feedback originates in the felt pressures of exposure to scrutiny by others:

Lecturer [15]: So we have tried to ensure that the students do get information about what they've jointly said, and what the department has done to meet their comments. ... you do need to

promulgate what you did. I mean the communication can't just be the students to the department about what was wrong, you've then got to continue the dialogue over a period of time and make it clear that we did respond. ... We're at a crunch point you see. The length of time we've been doing it ... We've got ourselves into a very interesting position, because we are going to have to do something about the really bad performers, and there are some. And I mean we need to do that as a matter of urgency.

'Efficiency' and 'effectiveness'; technical expertise: The activity of student feedback is also a question of optimising the use, and flows, of formal mechanisms and organisational processes. In both respects student feedback becomes a technical problem that necessitates technological expertise or organisational clarification. The central issue is a need to maximise returns on the time and administrative efforts invested in student feedback. If the method of student feedback employed is the SEQ, then greater 'efficiency' is gained by speeding the generation and analysis of documented information, and by lessening the administrative resource-input required:

Lecturer [15]: You see we've only been in the business of questionnaire work in earnest for probably the last 3 or 4 years. ... So we are formalising, and we've been formalising for 3 or 4 years. We've been very bad at mechanising analysis and so on. We spend far too much time- You know we have secretaries sitting there for hours, going through the questionnaires on each unit, but we put a huge effort into it. I think that we haven't taken advantage of many of the mechanical means of analysing questionnaires that exist. ... We do take it seriously, but I think we do it fairly inefficiently which means we take up very valuable time. ... my firm belief is that

there should be a commonly agreed set of questions about the 'nuts and bolts'. I think you could do a very rapid analysis of those. ... I think what I am saying is that if we could mechanise much of this, there wouldn't be a problem about how much resource we are using.

'Efficiency' and 'effectiveness'; eliminating deviation: The previous discussion has conceptualised student feedback as an increasingly standardised and regularised procedural activity. However actual routines and processes varied with each respective departmental base, and no lecturer claimed that these were adopted or adhered to in a uniform manner by all lecturers within a department or faculty. Some acknowledged what they saw as malpractice:

Lecturer [6]: There are certain people who regularly get bad marks on the questionnaires , and they explain it away by saying, "It's because there's a problem with the students". ... There are some people who conveniently forget to hand them out at the end of a course. And then have to do it sort of retrospectively, knowing that it won't then be a representative sample. All sorts of fun and games go on like that.

Lecturer [10]: The [student evaluation form] is really a one-way process at the moment, in that students fill it in and they give it back to the tutor, and the tutor could simply throw them all in the rubbish bin, tear it up. The tutor has no obligation to show it to anybody else, and certainly no obligation in any way to talk back to the students about what's been gleaned from the form. ... So it's not a very effective system. ... You see I've got those, they're sitting on my floor. Probably when I leave and go to a new institution I'll chuck them in the bin and nobody will ever ask to see

them or do anything with them. So from the student's point of view I think it's quite understandable that they think it is a waste of time.

Lecturers identified a set of problems, to which the solution was, potentially, the introduction of tighter, more explicit rules for the conduct of student feedback. They suggested that there was a need to improve the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of practices, to encourage uniform and universal practices, and to minimise alleged malpractice. However lecturers were loathe to commit themselves to their own conclusions, in part because of a perceived contradiction. The system may well be made more 'efficient' if procedures were tightened, were student feedback processed with greater administrative and technological proficiency, and were there enhanced standardisation of practice. The SEQ method was identified as compatible with these needs. However, whilst the outcome of 'formalisation' and 'standardisation' was greater 'efficiency', these processes also led to decreased levels of effectiveness: the SEQ generates less productive information than 'informal' methods. Both the efficient, formalised system and the method are not useful forms of 'communication'. They are thus a waste of time and administrative resource.

If the method were productive, perceptions of the costs of time and administrative resources may well not be so negative. However, because the onus on the lecturer is to use the SEQ, the question of 'effectiveness' changes from that of effective 'communication' to that of meeting mandatory requirements whilst making as little demand on the lecturer as possible:

Lecturer [15]: I think we do it fairly inefficiently, which means we take up very valuable time.

Which means that in a way the academics start to worry about the work input and whether it is counter-productive - whether we are overloading students with the questionnaires, let alone the staff. ...

Rachel: Do you ask for detailed description, for explanation - rather than just rankings?

Lecturer [15]: We do use questionnaires of both kinds. But the difficulty is of course, that the more you move into that, the more time consuming the process becomes, because the analytical input necessary to deal with summative content of that kind becomes very substantial ... I think the faculty's attitude as a whole is that we are putting a hell of a lot into this - are we getting much back?

Conclusion: 'Formalisation' does not imply an advanced degree of sophisticated, accepted and embedded customs; it represents an encroaching solidification of bureaucratic systems, and the standardisation of procedures for administering the SEQ and processing its results. At departmental or faculty level, 'formalisation' is motivated by pressures to conform to the specifications of institutional policy and to render systems and procedures verifiable and minimally burdensome. 'Formalisation' is also a dilemma, in which procedures and methods that do not cost great amounts of time and resource are themselves unproductive. Concepts of 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency' coincide: virtue is achieved through technical excellence such that absolute costs of time and resource consumption are minimised at the same time as the practice of student feedback conforms to the externally and internally contrived and imposed concepts of 'communication'. Student feedback is a concept that generates and symbolises these changes and tensions.

1.3. Students: 'It's just one of those bureaucratic things'

The meaning of student feedback centres on the completion of a *form*; student feedback implies documentation. It is a tedious experience of the routines of the standard SEQ and a task that is undertaken without excitement. It is a mundane matter of engaging thoughts to a degree sufficient to tick a box; it does not stimulate the student's imagination or lead them to anticipate change. Students conceptualise the SEQ as just one of the predictable activities that structure, regulate and punctuate their experience of the university. The SEQ is familiar to them: their ideas of the SEQ mirror their experience of the university.

Student [1]: We get an evaluation form about twice a term that is passed around in the lectures.

... It says, "How do you rate the lecturer with regard to blackboard usage, audibility, use of examples", and these things. "Appearance", and then it's got, "How would you improve the lecture?, What are the good points?, What are the bad points?, Any other comments?". Sort of very general. ... This year the average class size is about 150 and everybody obviously ticks those little boxes and you normally only get about between 5 or 10 comments, and they are generally general comments like, "Can you slow down a bit", and things like that. ... I mean obviously the good lecturers comment on them the next lecture. ... But perhaps a few of the rest don't bother reading them because they've taught the course this way for 20 years or something.

Rachel: Do you have the same type of form for all your lectures?

Student [1]: Yes a standard form. A [subject/area] Faculty form.

The SEQ is a regular paper-pushing activity: the exercise generates 'whole wads' (Student 6) of completed forms. 'Feedback sheets' (Student 1) do not appear to

represent this next student's ideas of *communication*:

Student [5]: They don't ask for student feedback enough. At the end of your course they give you this little piece of paper, "Were you satisfied with your course?" I filled in every single one of them last year, "No, I am not satisfied". And I gave valid reasons why. I put my name on each one, "Please contact if you would like to talk about this". Not one of them contacted me, not one of them. And that is what they call feedback? That's bollocks if you ask me. ... They just hand you this piece of paper, they don't even tell you what it's for. ... And then at the end of the day you aren't getting any feedback on what you've said. Now in the second year again they are going to do the same thing, I know they are, they are going to give me more of these things.

Instead, his, and others' impression was that student feedback is *administration*.

Student feedback implies a cyclical rhythm of standardised and routine processes of documentation. Student feedback generates paper but not change. Student 5 suggests that lecturers' reaction to the information is to think, 'Let's just chuck these things on the back burner'. Another student had the impression that student feedback was not *supposed* to lead to change:

Student [4]: It's just important to review things on a regular basis anyway. Not necessarily to make any changes, just to confirm that you are going about it in the right way.

Her concept of student feedback is almost existential: the 'regular review' affirms and verifies the existence, and correct operation, of activities. This view was shared by the following student. She suggests that the 'bureaucratical' act both produces, and acts as

a symbol of, 'organisation'. Again, student feedback is a process of *materialisation*:

Rachel: What do you think they are for?

Student [3]: ... You mean the nice forms, that you say, "How was this presented?" ? ... Well I assume that it's good feedback to the staff themselves and how they are coming across, and also, I don't know, it's just one of those bureaucratic things, that they like you to have forms to fill in, sort of to show that- I don't know. I mean, I don't know how useful they actually are.

Students' views echo the opinions of one lecturer who claimed that students do eventually come to understand what student feedback is all about:

Lecturer [14]: I think that 3rd year students treat student feedback forms appropriately. And the way they treat them is with complete derision, as far as I can see. ... By the third year you realise that these student feedback forms are just a mad thing that university departments do. I mean quite a lot of our third year students just don't bother to fill them in, they just hand them into you at the end of one of the lectures and say, "Oh yeah, I enjoyed it".

The lecturer's comments both confirm and condone students' impressions and interpretations.

1.4. 'Swings and roundabouts': resolving the dilemma of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness'.

Students' willingness to invest time and effort: For students, student feedback was an unremarkable activity that signalled closure – it marked the final 10 minutes at the end of a course. The students acknowledged a low-level of engagement; they saw this to be compatible with the lack of meaning attributable to the ritual of the SEQ. Students were aware that their descriptions of their own, and fellow students' tendencies to mindlessly 'tick boxes' in a rush implied carelessness and lack of concern.

Rachel: Did you ever fill in any comments?

Student [3]: I think I probably did a couple of times. Not very often, it depends. I don't tend to fill in comments on those kind of forms. ... And then again a lot of people would [laugh] just sort of circle anything really. I don't think they take them particularly seriously ... unless it was a particularly strong feeling they had about it, and a lot of people won't be bothered to fill in comments. ... Because they are often given out sort of at the end of a lesson, and people just sort of think, 'Oh yeah', fill in a few things, and give it back again.

Rachel: Did you have to give a rank or anything like that?

Student [4]: Yes, 1-5, 5 being the best, 1 being the poorest.

Rachel: How did you go about deciding what numbers to put?

Student [4]: It was coming to the end of the lecture, so 3 was quite a popular number (laugh).

Yet students were not necessarily overly concerned about the bad impression that this

might create. Rather, students reasoned that their reluctance to invest time, and their lack of interest and motivation was justified: the SEQ is an example of mad and meaningless bureaucracy; it is not change inducing or change oriented. The SEQ is ineffective, thus time spent completing it is wasted.

Some lecturers recognised, and were concerned that students spent little time thinking about and completing questionnaires:

Lecturer [9]: If you get into more complicated analysis, then you need to devote more time to it, students need to devote more time to it. And even when you try and persuade students that you know, here's an opportunity for them to actually give some feedback, ... you still get the impression that they want to just rush through, ticking the boxes or whatever, as quickly as possible.

Some lecturers appreciated that students were probably fed up with the quantity of questionnaires that they had to fill in, and others thought that students had more important priorities for their time:

Lecturer [3]: There are so many questionnaires going out, there's so much of this now, the students get a bit sort of bombarded with it. ... I mean I think a few years ago there wasn't very much structured about how we get this feedback. Whereas there's a lot more structured now.

Lecturer [6]: And students were expected to go away and fill it all out, make comments, numerical quantification of the courses plus sort of general qualitative comments, and then bring

it back. And it was a very time-consuming thing to do I think, for students. You know students are busy people around, they haven't got time at the end of courses with exams and things ... you were lucky if you got 25% back.

The 'swings and roundabouts' of qualitative data: Because the imperative is to produce documented data and analysis, students' comments have to be gathered in written form; listening and talking are redundant. Many lecturers also identified that this implies the use of the SEQ. Yet the SEQ entails compromising the form and range of information gathered. The generation and analysis of qualitative *data* is perceived as onerous and cumbersome, relative to the speed with which quantitative data can be administered.

Lecturer [2]: In reality, if we want at least some sort of information we can react to, pragmatism seems to say we need to do this sort of rather simplistic, "Here is a questionnaire, fill it in in the next half hour", sort of approach. Because at least it gives us something to work on.

Lecturer [6]: I mean this has been through so many committees, and I have put forward so many drafts of the questions that should be asked and looked at hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of different questionnaires from all sorts of different courses and universities, and surfed the Internet looking for different ways of doing it. ... I mean short of actually having questionnaires that go on for hundreds and hundreds of questions that cover every single aspect of learning, then you've got to reduce it down to something manageable. ... this is the sort of point I've arrived at where I think these, these might actually do the job as well as anything else. And until

something better comes along I shall stick with it. But I am aware of the limitations of it. You're constantly playing off- It's swings and roundabouts really, you're playing off one quantity against another. Do you go for a real big quantitative measure, or do you do for targeted, analytical qualitative measures, or whatever. So we've ended up with this 1 side of A4, that questionnaire, which is the same for every course. What that means is you get actually less information on the questionnaire, but you get a response rate of 80, 90, 100% because you use the last 10 minutes of the last hour in the course to just get them to sit down and fill it out. So everyone that's there does it. So it's swings and roundabouts again, really. ... But it's all so time consuming you know. It's easier just to photocopy a hundred copies of this [questionnaire], hand it out and count them up. You know.

That lecturers perceive the SEQ to be an unproductive method. They also recognise that students treat the SEQ with derision; this further exacerbates the contention felt by lecturers concerning the mandatory nature of student feedback. Just as lecturers deplore the burden of the unproductive, 'formal', SEQ they also know that students place little value on the practice.

1.5. The context and rationale for student feedback: a response to the external climate.

Students; the internal and the external: The following student perceives that the motivation for undertaking student feedback originates in the general socio-political climate. At first, this suggests that he understands that institutions exist in, and are

therefore subject to, this socio-political context. In these terms, student feedback is an example of institutional responsiveness. However he feels that the response is disingenuous; the institutional response does not represent an alignment of the 'internal' and 'external' in any integrative sense: the institutional response is grudging compliance with a set of demands imposed from *outside*.

Rachel: What do you think the point of these forms is?

Student [2]: I think, sometimes I just feel that the university is saying, "We want to pay 'lip-service' to the idea of student appraisal of lecturers and the courses". ... They are not *really* listening to what we are saying. If you make a complaint or have a query or a constructive suggestion I just wonder whether it is going to be acted upon or whether they just say, "Well ... they've said things, but we can't be bothered to change it really, it would be too much hassle, seeing as we have just printed the course sheets for next term".

He suspects that lecturers undertake feedback unwillingly: the practice is the product of a jaundiced view of external demands. This leaves him with the impression that the culture of the institution still holds students' views to carry little imperative value. This next student interprets recalcitrance as a reflection of compliance with *internally* generated and hierarchically imposed regulations:

Rachel: Why were they doing it in the first place, do you think?

Student [5]: Probably because they have to - I think they have to give them out, by, by obviously this Dean's ruling that you have to give one of these things out afterwards.

This next student felt that some lecturers pursued student feedback on grounds of self-protection, as a preparation for potential managerial scrutiny.

Student [7]: It's for them ... what they are wanting from us is that they are wanting to know what are the things that are successful, what aren't and whatever within the course ... It's a vital document for them, because if they get a large drop out, then they are going to have to justify themselves.

Students' ideas of student feedback are suggestive of institutional responsiveness and change. However they characterise this as a formal reaction to perceived constraint and sanction. They identified that these pressures might be either externally or internally generated. Moreover, whilst the process is connected to socio-political and managerial pressures, the pressures do not lead to 'integration': there is a 'gap' between internal and external, between the management and the managed. Student feedback reveals and produces divisions within the organisation.

Lecturers; the internal and the external: Many lecturers experienced student feedback as a response to internally applied and enforced managerial demands. The purpose of student feedback appeared to be an obligation to conform to departmental procedures; however what these procedures were, and what their purposes were was usually expressed in vague terms. The confusion about the ambiguous purpose of student feedback were keenly felt by those 'on the edge' (Lecturer 7) of departmental and course management, as can be seen in this extract from a post-doctoral lecturer:

Rachel: What's the purpose for the information in the department?

Lecturer [7]: I haven't been party to any of the discussions, but I imagine that it's just to monitor- Keep tabs on people and make sure they're not doing an abysmal job. I couldn't tell you to be honest. ... I mean [another colleague] is the course co-ordinator, so he's responsible for doing the report on it. And he's supposed to feed back to someone. I don't know if it's the Teaching Committee or some body or other, about what's being done to improve things. ... I don't know how much of it is a sop either to - higher up, the university saying you've got to have assessment. I don't know how much of it is, "Well we'll do this, because it fulfils what the university tells us to do". I've got no idea what the actual motives behind the people who enforce it, are.

Rachel: So it's of little concern to you?

Lecturer [7]: Well it's a standard feedback form, that I have no direct influence on, and it comes back and I'll try and get what I can out of it, but- If I want to do something I'll have to do it myself.

The majority of lecturers also connected the concept and procedural exigencies of student feedback with the demands of national level accountability exercises. Initially this next lecturer argues that student feedback represents and evidences a general responsiveness within the institution. He then goes on to characterise the situation as one in which 'responses' are formal and procedural. These responses are considered and held significant by managers at senior level: they do not reflect an organic, internal shift in culture; they reflect newly 'ordered' and 'ordained' roles and duties.

Lecturer [16]: And I think that one of the things that seems to be happening a lot more these days is the willingness of institutions to listen to students. And I think one of the reasons why that might have happened is the advent of the Higher Education Charter. If you look at the

government version of the Charter, and look at how institutions are responding to it, some institutions will say, "Well the government one is fine, but we think we can tailor-make one for our own institution, which serves our needs and the students' needs better". ... Whereas other places might not be so enthusiastic about rewriting it, because that'll upset the government. And sadly there are some places that don't even know that there's a government one on the table. But I think everybody knows what their role is, what their stake is and where their responsibility lies.

The 'formalisation' of student feedback is an attempt to shape up according to, and to provide the evidence for, the criteria that lecturers imagine the HEQC/TQA assessors will seek as proof of 'good' internal management. Student feedback is a practice associated with departmental attempts to meet the exigencies of external scrutiny.

Lecturer [13]: I'm also responsible because the HEFCE are going to assess us in March, this department. I'll be responsible for ... doing the self-assessment of the department. And then arranging the visit, or dealing with the HEFCE assessors, when they come. And obviously one of the things that they will be looking at is things like student feedback. We're very conscious of issues like that. ... This idea of 'quality', of the way things are lectured, the way things are marked, assessment in general has got a much higher profile. ... I think what has happened is that because of the higher profile of teaching quality that the government has put on us now, we're thinking about it more. And it's rubbed off on the students, I think they are realising that now. ... I think that it's interesting to see how the climate has changed, but I think that it's come from the government through us. Although you might argue that perhaps there's something in society now, everybody's got a charter for everything now, a charter for this, a charter for that, people feel that they can complain if things aren't right and perhaps it's part of that.

Both these lecturers also associate student feedback with a more general cultural shift in the wider society. Yet, they felt that this external, cultural shift promoted the *requirement* for an internal response; this was demonstrated at the level of developing new procedures, rather than through changes in attitudes and beliefs. Although

Lecturer 13 felt that ‘quality’ had ‘rubbed off on the students’, and had made them feel more able to approach staff, he sees the agent of change as the government.

Alternatively, that academics are, ‘slowly beginning to realise, I think, that it is actually finding out how we actually sort of satisfy our customers, and whether it’s right for them’ (Lecturer 3), indicates that the agent of change is not the ‘student’ but the subject of the Charter: the ‘customer’.

The dominant pressure is the prescription, enforcement and scrutiny of ‘good practice’ by statutory agencies. Owing to this, the concept of student feedback resonates with undertones of the work, threats and risks which lecturers associate with TQA and HEQC Audit. The major task was to supply adequate documentation:

Rachel: What are they for, those questionnaires?

Lecturer [6]: Well this is it. They played quite an important role in TQA, in that they were all attached to all the different course documentation. We had to write a digest of them, and then also, if you wanted, to attach all the questionnaires from the last, 3 years I think it was. ...

Rachel: Where does this information end up?

Lecturer [6]: This pile of crap on my desk? [points to a desk with a pile of completed questionnaires] It’ll eventually go into the course documentation which we will be keeping for the next TQA.

A lecturer who had acted as a TQA assessor described the process as beneficial. Yet the change induced centres on departmental administrative procedures:

Lecturer [9]: It's worthwhile just to make sure that departments have actually got their acts together, that they've just got the paperwork filed properly, if you like, and aren't doing anything disastrous" .

Another explains student feedback in terms of its role in HEQC Audit. Student feedback is expressed in terms of organisational structures and management procedures.

Lecturer [16]: We ask for evidence of how they handle feedback. ... We wanted to test those procedures. ... We weren't there to investigate the specific issue, we were there to look at the procedures. ... What we were looking for was a complaint that had been registered by students, or an issue raised by students, and which committee deals with it. Does it have to go to a higher committee, a sub-committee, and how is that information fed back to students, in order that they're completing the loop back to students?

1.6. Conclusion

Efforts in providing for the demands of student feedback were considered a necessary use of some time and administrative resource. Yet both 'formalisation' - setting up procedures, designing methods and techniques - and the actual act of gathering information about students' views was conceptualised as an 'offensive'. The offensive

was geared to meeting, or guarding against internally, management applied or externally, government applied pressures.

Lecturer [10]: We got an excellent [in the TQA]

Rachel: Did it have any impact on the way things go on here?

Lecturer [10]: It had a lot of impact on the form and not a lot on the content. You know, you prepare all these papers to impress, and you set up all these procedures, and then you have your quality assessments.

The procedures were attempts to present an image of the department that will impress the assessors. Yet this lecturer feels that the assessors' criteria do not address the vital questions.

Lecturer [2]: Somewhere in this little lot [on the desk] there is the first draft of the self-assessment document that we are going to have to submit in not very many months - we are very much at the stage of just trying to write our own documentation, and seeing whether it matches up to reality. ... In the end it is going to be a sense of just looking at the document and almost labelling, "These are the procedures" - It's what you get judged against. ... In some ways formal procedures aren't necessarily always the answer I think. I think there is too much emphasis on the procedural audit rather than trying to look at what are the students really learning, what is the nature of their experience. You know just because there's a whole load of procedures that look good on a piece of paper and we can justify them when they talk to us... doesn't mean that actually the educational experience is a good one.

Student feedback was considered an appropriate and vital activity to the extent that the general climate indicates to lecturers that attending to students' views is important. Yet, the demands, constraints and sanctions inherent to the context in which students' views had risen in status was lamented, at the same time as the focus and outcomes of the activity were contested.

Although the process of 'formalisation' felt both virtuous and contentious to lecturers, the value of the information and the procedures was also a frequent point of discussion and confusion. Significantly, the 'formalisation' of systems and techniques such that these would be efficient in respect of departmental costs of time and administration, and efficient in respect of meeting demands of 'good practice', was a process questioned in terms of its productivity. Thus whilst gathering information about students' views was sensed as an increasingly important activity, this belief stands in tension with the simultaneous view that the actual information collected was of low status and had little actual impact.

I have shown that 'communication' with students is held to be important. Yet I have also shown that whilst the effective and efficient management of 'communication' identifies the appearance of 'responsiveness' to both external and internal demands, it translates as the procedural, administrative and technological organisation of the SEQ. This is not a means for, or concept of interaction and exchange: student feedback is the materialisation of a social process in the form of (unproductive and tedious) documentation and institutional routine.

ⁱ As noted in Section One, I use the term 'SEQ' to refer to the student evaluation questionnaire method of student feedback. I use the term 'student feedback' as a generic expression; it identifies the phenomenon that this study seeks to reconceptualise. 'Student feedback' is used to refer to, and encapsulate the set of ideas that students and lecturers associate with the idea of student feedback. The meaning of 'student feedback' thus includes a diverse range of issues, questions, conflicts, controversies and contradictions. The SEQ is merely one of these ideas.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER TWO

Weakening the power and autonomy of the academy

Quality can be judged by looking at: academic standards as reflected by the design and content of courses, their fitness for purpose, what they require of students and how they meet the needs of employers'; quality of teaching. ... The Government ... believes universities, individually or collectively, should do more to reassure the public about the ways in which they control standards. ... The maintenance of high standards of teaching can be helped by systematic arrangements for: ... feedback from students themselves (DES 1987:16-18).

Introduction

This chapter explores lecturers' and students' experiences of student feedback in respect of its purpose as a tool to re-orientate the focus of higher education, to counter an alleged unresponsiveness to the needs of external society and economy. The intention is to dismantle the forms of organisation that serve the academic profession's allegedly inwardly focused *self-interests*.

First, I use an analytical model to aid conceptualisation of the university as a collegial form of organisation. The model provides a context in which to appraise more traditional descriptions of the structures, cultures and processes held to be typical of academic institutions and academic work. Second, in parts 2.2 - 2.4, I use analysis of the interviews to illustrate some characteristics of the structures, cultures and processes of academia, as perceived by students and lecturers. Third, in part 2.5 I consider what students and lecturers feel is a necessary process and direction of change. The chapter concludes that if student feedback is intended as an agent of change, it appears a weak mechanism that sends conflicting messages. The 'alien' concept of student feedback has been integrated to the extent that it functions in terms compatible with the existing culture; it is part of a familiar 'status quo'. Nevertheless, student feedback is also an experience of friction and frustration: this originates in the contrast between the direction and process of change desired by students and lecturers, and the terms and conditions of change represented by student feedback.

2.1. The self regulating, self-referenced collegium

Analytical models of organisation: Henry Miller (1995:96) presents a case for considering the university as an 'organisation'. He discusses various different analytical organisational models that enable description of what is distinctive about each university as an organisation. These models differentiate to the degree that structures and processes of

organisation place various emphasis on rational, ambiguous, or relational-interactive qualities and dynamics.

Miller cautions that the significance of the analytical models extends beyond their capacity to capture the essence of any individual organisation. Any university might be characterised as a composite of these qualities and dynamics. Moreover:

In practice, these models, in mixed and modified form, are used by university managers to inform their understanding and to guide and legitimate their activities. Different models and understandings of what the university is about are held by different groups, for which the institution may have markedly different realities and significance (Miller 1995:91).

The analytical models are conceptual devices. This implies an element of intentionality to their use (Barnett 1992a:22); they can be drawn on to identify imperatives for, to mobilise or discredit change within the organisation, or to justify the status quo of the organisation. For example, statutory texts represent the university as a 'collegial body ... which values and rewards professionalism and scholarship' (HEQC 1996a:5); this is perhaps an overture to an academic audience assumed hostile to the changes proposed.

Miller (1995:103) also emphasises that whilst 'everyone may experience the organisation in a different way, and define his or her own reality, some people have more power than

others to make their interpretation persuasive' (Miller 1995:103, on Walford 1987).

Lecturers and students have different experiences of the university, and draw on aspects of these to explain their views about student feedback. Students' and lecturers' respective ideas of their own, and others' status, agency and interests, both reflect, and are grounded in, their experiences and beliefs about the university. Lecturers and students draw on their beliefs to legitimate and justify their ideas of, and actions with student feedback.

If student feedback is a lever of change, the central questions are the extent to which change is believed legitimate and possible, and whether this is enabled by student feedback. One major issue underpinning these questions are respective beliefs about the boundaries of the lecturer's and the student's legitimate agency.

The collegial organisation: In describing the application of the *models* to universities, Miller identifies different organisational *forms*, and shows how each is contained within, or intersects the analytical models. In the previous chapter I discussed in brief Miller's typification of the bureaucratic-rational organisational *form*. In this chapter I also consider Miller's description of the collegial *form* of organisation. Both these organisational forms fit within the 'rational' *model* of organisation; both are premised on the principle of 'reason'.

Miller argues that the analytical distinction between the bureaucratic-rational and collegial

forms of organisation focuses on respective interpretations of 'reason'. In the former, reason is operationalised as frameworks of bureaucratic, hierarchically organised control mechanisms. Here, dissent is treated as deviance. In the collegial organisation however, it is held that the exercise of reason is an on-going process that brings and maintains consensus. Consensus and new solutions are reached through open discussion and democratic debate in decision-making forums to which community members with parity of status have equal access. Individual independence and a tolerance for contesting views are both presumed and valued, whilst potential fragmentation is avoided because mutual respect for decisions wrought by democratic processes is upheld as a central value. The values that give rise to democratic debate legitimate inclusive, co-operative deliberation of contesting viewpoints. The democratic process is constitutive: the on-going process brings and maintains 'organisation'.

Alternative ideas of 'collegiality': The classic concept of 'collegiality' identifies the university as 'a community of scholars engaged in the task of seeking truth' (Jaspers 1965). Alderman (1996:178-9) expands on this, and gives a definition similar to that adopted by McNay (1995): the 'collegiate' university is 'a self-justifying and self-regulating academic community', that enables and respects 'academic autonomy - the right to decide freely and independently how to perform their tasks ... loyalty to subject; loyalty to colleagues; [and] the pursuit of knowledge for academic ends'. 'Collegiality' identifies the parameters of work and the aspirations and duties of the academic professional. It also infers a set of

principles and processes of organisation.

Classic ideas of 'collegiality' do indeed present the 'collegiate' university as a democratic organisation. Yet, frequently these descriptions focus exclusively on the *structures* of shared, democratic decision making (c.f. Ramsden 1998:22), rather than on processes and values. Moreover, the idea of democracy is construed, typically, as a conceptual device that mobilises and protects academic *self*-interests. Contemporary discussion of classic concepts of the 'collegiate' university stresses an alleged inward focus; the defining features of the collegium are derided and devalued, as if they are both anachronistic - perhaps also the 'myth' of a golden age (see for instance Dearlove 1997, 1998) - and inappropriate within the contemporary social, economic and political context. Ramsden argues that as a process of decision making, collegiality is defunct in a 'higher education system whose institutions need to search for new funding sources, plan strategically, and compete with each other in a market with manifold clients, and which no longer possesses the homogeneity and stability which can make collegiality an effective form of getting things done' (Ramsden 1998:23). Yet he also argues that the concept of 'collegiality',

has also been made to do duty for an extraordinary range of valued academic processes

... Collegiality is closely related to ideas of individual academic freedom, disciplines as frames of reference, separation from external pressures, conservation of special knowledge and academic professionalism (p.22-3, my emphasis).

'Collegiality' has, therefore, to be understood as a contested concept; it is also a highly

diffuse term. Yet the ambiguity of the term 'collegiality' is useful. Difficulties in identifying what is meant by the term are used to imply that it belongs in a hazy, misty past. This supports arguments that 'collegiality' does not reference the character of contemporary universities; universities have simply moved on. Alternatively a derisive view of the loose baggage of ideas captured by the term 'collegiality' is drawn on to argue the need for a new, newly constituted idea of university. The term invokes a negative and legitimates the need for a change to a different, other form of organisation (Halsey 1992). 'Collegiality' becomes an imperative to, "Move on!"

Yet if 'collegiality' is an ill-defined notion, its use as a pejorative within largely negative discourses also casts ideas of internal democracy, truth-seeking, loyalty, academic freedom and academic autonomy in a negative light, without critical appraisal of what these ideas might mean.

The foundations of 'collegiality' and the 'collegiate' organisation: There are other, somewhat closer analyses of the structures, processes and conventions of universities. These focus on the social and political character of university organisations, and on the *systems* and *forces* that facilitate academic organisation, work and study.

Political structures, processes and conventions: Becher and Kogan (1980) emphasise

how universities are highly political organisations; the mobilisation and application of relative power are both regulative/constituting, and disruptive processes. Becher (1988) tends towards a definition of the university as a composite of different organisational features and dimensions, that range from the collegial and rational-bureaucratic, to the anarchic and political. He argues (1988, 1992) that in this sort of organisation, change is most successfully wrought through internal, and internally focused processes of bargaining, negotiation and compromise. Miller (1995) also favours a perspective in which the university is construed as an organisation constituted and regulated by social and political forces. However he holds that these social and political forces originate in competition between both internal *and external* interest groups.

Miller's political model of the university-organisation assumes: a level of persistent uncertainty; select and restrictive involvement in processes of institutional policy making; that influence and control of policy is contingent on continuous and long term occupation with policy; and that the power and authority of the formal organisation will be modified on the basis of political bargaining by effective interest groups.

Thus the emphasis of the political model is placed on overt processes of conflict, negotiation and competition between interest groups; success is contingent on relative levels of, and relations of power. Power and authority is also generated and mobilised covertly, by the control of agendas or the framework of discussion, by persistent reinforcement of particular ideologies, values and practices, or 'the mobilisation of bias'.

These efforts act to maintain a 'status quo' to the advantage of certain interest groups who thus achieve and assert their own authority. Alternatively the propagation of particular preferences, norms and values by powerful interest groups means that these conventions come to dominate. Moreover the 'status quo' comes to appear common-sense and inevitable. It is a 'status quo' that induces voluntary suppression of conflict and contest by members of the university. The 'status quo' is not contested by these groups owing to a suspicion that efforts at bringing about change are likely to be unsuccessful (c.f. Miller 1995:101-103).

Again, Miller's argument lacks an examination of the systems and forces in terms of *what* is contested socially and politically. So, although discussion is of the systems and relations of power and their impact on universities as organisations, what is omitted is an examination or a definition of *what* the power struggle seeks to uphold or promote *as* the values, objects and principles of the university.

2.2. Lecturers: student feedback in the context of a university

Student feedback raises the question of what it is about higher education that is assumed in need of change. Much of the discussion with lecturers about student feedback was centred on defining the nature and purpose of an academic culture. As part of this, it appeared that in order to be able to explain and argue their respective perspectives on student feedback, it was necessary to emphasise the significance of different aspects of the university *context*:

The centrality of the institutional context: The university was characterised as a “thinking institution”; it is an “intelligent community” (Lecturer 15) of “intelligent people” (Lecturer 3).

Lecturer [15]: Now to understand us, I think, you have to bear in mind the kind of university we are. ... Now broadly as an institution, most of my colleagues are researching their academic areas, not the business of teaching and learning. So that's the context for our efforts. ... No, I said at the beginning we are a particular university and we have never appointed [staff] to this institution on the basis of teaching, and I believe we never ever will. ... I believe that teaching should be a research activity. ... But that requires a change in mind set, and it would be a difficult thing to sell.

The widespread view was that change is a slow process in a university context. Change could not be brought about *by* the implementation of structures; what appears necessary is a previous, or concomitant shift in attitudes, values, norms and habits. Change would not be

achieved unless the academic community believed in it, and agreed that it was right and appropriate.

The centrality of the academic context: It was frequently pointed out that the academic's training is a long-term process. A significant aspect of what an academic learns during that process concerns the norms and conventions of academic work. An academic's training appeared to be an inexplicit process of socialisation into university culture. Perceived norms and conventions define the boundaries of acceptance and acceptability; they provide criteria for the determination and judgement of success.

The process of socialisation begins at the undergraduate level. Many lecturers spoke of the ways in which students become accustomed to the culture and conventions of the academic institution. On entry, students begin to learn what is appropriate, what is acceptable, and what is necessary.

Lecturer [13]: I mean there are certain conventions in the academic world. I think that you don't slag your colleagues off in front of the students. ... I mean there are certain professional standards one has to keep. I think that even at the informal level I think there are certain ground rules which are present.

Rachel: Are they implicit?

Lecturer [13]: They are implicit I think. ... Obviously they have not come across members of

academic staff before ... and it's a question of how they relate to us, what sort of role we fulfil. ... One or two will come and call me 'sir' (laugh), others on first meeting will call me [first name]. In most cases it's just Dr this and Dr that. I mean I'm against the sort of trendy lecturer image where when you first meet them you say, "Call me [first name]". It's a bit 1960's-ish, you know like 'swinging vicars' and that sort of thing. ...

Rachel: Does your relationship with the students change?

Lecturer [13]: Yes, they get more relaxed when they are settled. But most of the changes take place in the first year. Once you get to know them in the laboratories, you get to mix with them a lot, they usually begin to relax a bit, they realise that they are not at school anymore.

Messages about academic culture might be communicated to students through informal contacts with members of staff:

Lecturer [15]: Now one of the key points about communication in a university context, is that there's lots of small group work, or even lots of individual contact. ... Now, I don't know how you view your learning experiences at your mother's and father's knees, but some people would argue that that's a very productive learning relationship, particularly in the early part. In a way, our people come here and they're just starting on a serious academic road, and you can argue that that very close contact is a very good way forward.

This next lecturer suggests that norms are communicated through the student's experience of the standards and conventions of academic work. She perceives a tendency towards

homogeneity on the student body; she understands this as the outcome of a pressure to 'fit in' both academically and socially:

Lecturer [10]: [The alternative entry students] have a lot of trouble mixing socially at the beginning, ... eventually they sort of meld in, by the third year they meld into the other students, but the first couple of years they have a hard time. ... After a couple of years learning to think like a [discipline], they're indistinguishable.

Rachel: That's interesting, I wonder why that happens?

Lecturer [10]: Well you learn to conform (laugh), you learn to conform, you learn to realise what is expected ... you adapt to what is obviously expected of you. Which is not necessarily something good, or something right.

Some lecturers talked about how they gradually begin to build closer relations with undergraduate students, as the student progresses through the years of their course. As the student becomes more like an academic, the lecturer identifies with them and is interested by them to a greater extent:

Lecturer [9]: Things do change in the third year. It's almost like academic staff suddenly recognise the student as being fairly sound to have reached the third year and are therefore worth talking to (laugh). ... I think it's perhaps because, especially for the academics, you are doing things with them that are more interesting. You can be interested in your lecture courses to first years, but once you get to the third year you are perhaps doing things with the students that are challenging to you as an

academic, as well as for the students.

The relation between students and lecturers involves a power dynamic in which the lecturer has greater authority and status; this is a reflection of the lecturer's functional role, and a reflection of their credentials as a more expert member of the academic community. Even if the lecturer attempts to dismantle the differentials in status and authority, their greater expertise remains a significant issue:

Lecturer [13]: [Speaking about students as 'customers'] I think we have to think more about these artificial divisions between the student and the lecturer. The way I try to think about my students - and I'm sure many other members of staff do this as well - is that they're just, they're colleagues. You are working with them. Now it just so happens that you know a lot more than they do about a particular area, and you are trying to tell them about that. And if they are interested then they can gain a lot from you.

Furthermore, the lecturer's authority and status as expert is not neutral, in a context where the lecturer is also arbiter of the student's progress:

Lecturer [2]: If you do slate a colleague, OK you've still got to work with them ... but it's not quite like slating somebody that you know is marking your exam paper next week.

These lecturers suggest a process of socialisation during which the student learns to

recognise and adhere to the norms and conventions of both academic work and of social relations.

Learning to teach; the development of idiosyncratic habits: The lecturer learns to teach through improvisation. Practices soon become personal customs and norms:

Lecturer [6]: I haven't got a lot of experience teaching anywhere else, so the way we've organised student feedback here and the way that I've taught here has been sort of really fairly off the cuff right from the start. It took me quite a few years to find my feet I think in many ways, but now I've settled down to a level of complacency already (laugh). ... all you really have as a lecturer is where you did your study as an undergraduate, where you did your research, which is often the same place, and then your first job. And that's it. And once you've been in your first job for a few years, even if you move on, you take the habits that you've developed with you I think.

He felt that evaluation should be a process in which lecturers and students grasped a fresh perspective on their work. In order to achieve this, both need an external point of reference, in order to be able to make an assessment of their approaches and assumptions:

Lecturer [6]: You know as I was saying in the beginning, about being a lecturer- Just like students when they come here, they don't know what 'teaching' should be because they haven't been to university before. So, are either of us in a position to be able to evaluate what's gone on? That's

why I think in universities you do get this sort of reinforcement and entrenchment of bad practice,
because nobody really knows from either side how it could be different. And therefore the
questionnaires are self-perpetuating because they evaluate something which exists.

If academics are now required to change their habitual practices and orientations to their
work, it is necessary first to 'unlearn' beliefs and assumptions about the legitimacy of
academic conventions. Yet the slowly learned, normative basis of an academic's habitual
approach to tasks will be difficult to shift with any degree of rapidity.

The centrality of the departmental context: Success within university education
therefore appears to involve learning to recognise and appreciate a complex of norms and
conventions; these apply not only to academic work, but maintain the structures, processes
and culture of the academic institution. With respect to student feedback, what is
significant is that this set of implicit and yet recognised rules provides a structure for, and
sets constraints on, academic work and social interactions.

First, students' feedback has to conform to the norms appropriate to academic work:

Lecturer [11]: At the end of the session, you just write down how you are feeling about the topics
that are being dealt with. ... But with [these students], I realised that the quality of the remarks that
they were making weren't helpful to them, because they were reacting in an un-academic way. ... it

wasn't really working for them because they were making value judgements. ... And so I thought that one of the things that was difficult for students to sort out, and was essential for academic learning, was to distinguish between judgements and the analysis and descriptive base which had informed the judgement. ... [So I was now using the feedback as a tool], rather than being overt about the nature of academic truth. ... And not one of them failed to grasp the point that you cannot make assertions without having some kind of evidence to back it.

Second, student feedback is a social process, that implies a set of more general social constraints. Lecturers felt that the student will learn to broach an issue with due cordiality and respect for the lecturer's role. The pattern and nature of interaction between students and lecturers is *constrained* by both social and academic norms and conventions; however, the roles and rules are *observed* and *enforced* by both students and lecturers:

Lecturer [6]: You know, it just seems to me there's always this constant barrier, this sort of, like a curtain between staff and students, which is very very difficult to break through and get an honest opinion on either side. ... I was a mature student so I wasn't in with the rest of them I was always sort of seen as being partly the class enemy because I was friends with the lecturers, and I spent more time with the lecturers than I did with the students, so I think they thought of me as a Fifth Columnist within the student body. ... I also think that students are frightened of saying what they really think to lecturers in case it then reflects badly on how the lecturer treats them. You know in case it then gets translated into bad marks. And then there's not just the fear element, there's the element of not wanting to be nasty to people. It happens in your own personal life all the time. ... It's a very difficult

barrier to break through. I tried to do it by getting friendly with the students, by actually going to the departmental library and sitting with them and talking. And by going out drinking with them, and treating them like fellow adults, and fellow academics, rather than this sort of class barrier, some sort of student-staff thing. But that's a dangerous tactic as well, because it accentuates, it reinforces the idea, "Well we can't say anything nasty to him because we go out drinking with him, and he's a good mate".

Lecturers felt that students are conditioned into a set of role relationships that mean students are loathe to criticise those who have greater authority over them. This was thought to be a hindrance to open and free communication. Yet some lecturers thought it was important to uphold students' and lecturer's respective roles, and the structured relations compatible with them:

Lecturer [2]: Students don't want to be seen as criticising other academics. Either you to your face, or other academics to your face. In the extreme they will. ... But more generally you don't. After all you're criticising the people who are marking your exams.

Rachel: How often are you involved in informal conversations with students?

Lecturer [2]: It depends on the year. Final years I tend to have extensive 'chats' to. First year I will be talking to students, but because I'm wearing a sort of first year course director's hat, there is always some degree of formality in that. ... Actually I quite like talking to students, and getting some impression, but there are sort of rigidities in the structure, because of the sort of formal nature of what I so compared with what they do. ... There's reluctance from them to commit themselves I think,

on certain areas. And equally, I've had the odd student who's been sort of very friendly with me, and phoned up more or less and said, "Do you want to go to the pub?". Which is nice, but again, I sort of feel very caught. It could easily be actually sending the wrong signals to other students in the student body, that *that* student is a favourite or whatever. So I actually feel quite reluctant to meet students socially.

The significance of a peer culture: Lecturers make a distinction between criticism from a peer, and criticism from a student. Implicit to descriptions of these differences was a set of assumptions about a peer's status, role and credentials. Within a department, a colleague is a member of the same disciplinary community, is assumed to share similar levels of expertise, and is treated as an equal. Criticism from a colleague counts, because that person is assumed to know at least as much about the disciplinary content of a lecture or seminar:

Lecturer [9]: I think it is this thing about when you're in a lecture with students, you are in this power position of hopefully having more knowledge than they have. You are somehow trying to pass on, transfer this knowledge. Whereas if there's someone in there, making some sort of assessment, even if it's an assessment of your- not the content, but the teaching method. You may, you also have this idea that perhaps they actually know more than I do about this subject, and therefore they may be thinking that I'm saying a load of rubbish, that it's all wrong.

The perception is that relative to student feedback, criticism from a colleague is more likely

to be valuable. Because the colleague possesses relatively greater disciplinary and teaching expertise, the criticism is likely to be of a higher level of relevance and integrity than that from students. This means it is more likely to be used. It is *more* useful information.

Lecturer [2]: I think they can at least give you some idea of whether you are getting your message across to people, or whether you're just confusing the issue. Because after all if some one does understand something and is actually sitting there thinking, "Huh?", then you really do know that you're making a mess of it. They are more expert. They're more expert in terms of the content, they're more expert in terms of presentation as well. They actually know what it is like to stand on the other side of the desk. So I think they can offer useful critique.

Yet giving feedback to a peer is a risk. First, this is because cordial, mutually esteeming or good working relationships may be damaged:

Lecturer [2]: I suppose in extreme cases there could be a reluctance, for the assessor to really - you could find yourself in quite an awkward position of effectively having to really slate a colleague. In general you are feeling that if you do slate a colleague, OK, you've still got to work with them. There are problems there.

Lecturer [13]: We've set up a scheme where people from one department do peer observation of people from another. Which is perhaps a bit easier because you are a bit more distant - it's a bit easier to give feedback. Well it's, you can perhaps be more honest with somebody who is not a

close friend. I mean if you are observing somebody who is a friend in the department you might feel it is more awkward to be critical. ... Again the key to that is, the key to giving the feedback is simply to replay what you saw, rather than making value judgements about what you saw. You can't dive in and say, "You made a mess of that didn't you, I'd have done it much better".

Second, criticism between colleagues is a risk because the person who is observing could 'spread the word' amongst other members of the same peer and disciplinary group.

Lecturer [6]: I give a lecture to 100 students in the 1st year, it's not that private really. But it's the privacy of power, isn't it really. You know if you had 100 first year students in front of you, you are in a position of power, you're in a position of knowledge, you're in a position of being able to get information across. But as soon as you have one other peer in there, another lecturer, then your attitude changes enormously. ... You know you're just worried that what you're saying to the 100 students- there's going to be something wrong with it, or that the other person is going to pick up how it is coming across or whatever. And being observed by one of your peer group is a very different kettle of fish to actually being in a room with 100 students. And I think that that is a power thing, because again that person, that one person has the power to actually- Yes has the experience, and therefore the power, to be able to expose shortcomings in your teaching. ... when somebody comes in who is not a member of that group, who comes in to evaluate you ... that penetrates that cosy little private club that was going on before, and changes the nature of it, makes it public in a very different way. That other colleague, or the assessor from the TQA, goes away and will talk to other people about the experience of that lecture. So I think that then makes it

threateningly public, rather than quite comfortably public in a private sense, with the students.

These lecturers view themselves as members of a peer group. It seems that members of the 'peer group' are responsive to each other, cautious of each other, and attempt to observe 'professional standards' of interaction. Moreover, the lecturers look to their peers for measures and advice about the extent to which their practice meets professional and disciplinary standards.

If lecturers are highly sensitive to criticism from their colleagues, this does not imply that the lecturers disregard students' comments; students' feedback is valued relative to that of colleagues. However the peer group wields greater power and influence than the student body: students are a private audience of relative novices whose views are of dubious validity, whereas a peer's comments are highly regarded, exacting and a potential threat.

2.3. Students: perceptions of conventions and inevitability

Students described how giving student feedback requires that they critique what they experience to be long-standing norms, rules and conventions. Their descriptions of this suggest that they recognise and observe these traditions, and think they apply both to social interaction and academic argument. In this context, the demands of giving criticism become fraught with tensions. This first year student sees student feedback as a risk: criticism not only implies that he has to question established cultures and practices, but also that he contravene what he perceives to be his student role. He is a 40 year old contemporary dance teacher, who does not normally lack confidence or ready opinions. Nevertheless in the context of the university he is concerned to establish the boundaries of legitimate behaviour, and not to step outside these. He fears that to do so would be treated as if he were 'rocking the boat'; it would meet with negative reaction:

Student [7]: I didn't want to waste the course. I had come here to learn. That meant that I was going to be an awkward bugger and talk say things and do things ...

Rachel: So why do you think that it took you a week and a half to pipe up and say something?

Student [7]: I was muttering under my breath, all the time. Anybody sat round me, they were like, 'You are getting really angry aren't you?' 'Yes'. It's like being new at school. It's like knowing, trying to suss how much permission you have. And I'd been in industry and I think, and I include education within industry, that it's still the 'do and say the right thing'. There's an expectation of you to get on with it and not rock the boat too much. ... There are lots of role things, and it's like sussing

what the role is and sussing who the players are, sussing what's going on. And the reality is, I think even having started to talk out, I still checked what, the kind of thing that I was saying. Because it's on the same basis as doing an assignment, you really need to look at your tutor ... If you don't do it in the fashion that that tutor wants, you don't get the mark that you want. ... It's about knowing the convention here.

It was over the period of the first year that this next student came to believe that lecturers' habitual practices were unlikely to change, and that these should be accepted as the norm, or "how it's done":

Student [1]: and everybody ticks those little boxes. ... Perhaps a few of the [lecturers] don't bother reading them because they've taught the course this way for 20 years or something. ... I mean you have to accept it. I don't know whether or not I'm happy or not with it. ... If I had a problem I'd definitely say something, ... but maybe not in the first year, when it's all new, when you just accept it as this is the way to be taught maths at university. And then you've actually accepted that in the first year, so in the second year you are trundling along expecting the same thing and in the third year you expect the same thing. You might look back on it thinking, 'I don't know, that was a bit crap'. You might think, 'Oh they could have done that a lot better', but you don't actually think about it because you are accepting it as how it's done, maybe.

He suggests that students learn about what to expect during their time at university. This brings into question the assumption contained in statutory texts (c.f. HEQC 1994 para. 23)

that the student enters the university with fixed ideas of the nature and standards of higher educational provision. Students learn to expect what they find; whilst they may admit to preferences, these only become clear over time and in retrospective reflection. Moreover, the process of 'ticking boxes' is experienced as un-stimulating: the students are neither helped, nor required to question their own assumptions about the teaching and learning process. Students' feedback is unlikely to stimulate change, or generate alternatives because they evaluate what "what exists" (Lecturer 6), and do this against internally, rather than externally derived criteria.

The next student feels that she should *subject herself* to what she perceives to be established and 'set' practices. She then questions the extent to which change is practicable or possible. The perception of what is conventional and routine is also informed by her perception that the *lecturer* is unlikely to change their long established practices.

Student [3]: It depends on the class. But a lot of the things are fairly set, and you don't really have the imagination of what else you could have covered. ... I've always, yes I think I've always just going on and said, "Well this is the work I've got to do, I'll do it". ... You just sort of accept it I think a lot of the time, and just say, "Well I've got to do it, that's the way it is". ... I suppose it is difficult to change. Yes, because I suppose there have been a couple of lecturers who I've not particularly agreed with how they do things, but sort of that's just the way they are, I don't know how much a person can change how they teach a lesson really.

Some students expressed a pragmatic attitude towards change. This student rationalises that the 'status quo' is normal given perceived resource constraints. Despite these students' ideas that any situation represents an imperfect compromise, they neither demand nor anticipate change:

Student [4]: But usually, to be fair courses are almost set up to the best that they can. The lecturers and unit organisers aren't on purpose doing things to get in your way. They want it to be the best- You know there are so many factors that you don't realise that come into it, you know. Sort of money, and that's why they can't do that. I think pretty much that they've got it to the best that they can anyway.

Student [1]: What I am saying is that I'm quite happy with it and I know it's not perfect but- I don't think it is going to be perfect. I mean these people who are like you know 60 - 70, they have been lecturing this way for years.

Alternatively, a student might feel that the academic is in a position to resist change, because of the lecturer has greater levels of control and influence over student feedback. The suspicion is that traditional power-relations are played out on student feedback. Thus lack of change is predictable. This student's interpretation of the reasons for lack of change is grounded on the idea that lecturers are seldom highly motivated to change.

Student [2]: I just wonder whether it is going to be acted upon, or whether they just say, "Well they've said things, but we can't be bothered to change it really, it would be too much hassle.

This student also sees the 'status quo' as 'inevitable'. What is inevitable is that lecturers determine the nature and extent of change:

Student [4]: I think that they change what they want to change anyway to be honest. Um, I don't send a form in thinking, "Oh it's going to be changed!", because it rarely is.

2.4. Students: the significance of the academic context

Students' perceptions of student feedback exist in dialectical relation to their experiences and perceptions of the institution. Thus their perceptions of student feedback inform and reflect their understandings of the structures, conventions and norms that apply to both academic work and social processes. In return, their simultaneous and on-going interpretations of the university context inform and reflect their ideas of student feedback.

The institution: This student feels as if she lacks a firm foothold in the institution. Her experience of modularised courses leaves her with the impression that the institution is a disjointed and disconnected set of units. She lacks a departmental community and

supportive relationships with lecturers; the institution appears largely anonymous and impersonal.

Student [6]: I mean I could drop down dead and no one would notice for 8 weeks literally. ... there are big, you know, major gaps, big holes in the way the system, is connected together. ... [In a modular system] it's very difficult to get the feeling that you know where you are, that someone is piecing it all together for you and saying this is how your degree is going. ... It's just sometimes annoying that you can't turn somewhere and say, "What's going on, where am I?". ... People just drop by the wayside. When someone's going off the *track* a lot of people don't get picked up on it. So it doesn't stop. ... Say if you are in a drama group, ... you know they do sessions *together* and stuff, then you are part of a puzzle, and if part of that puzzle falls out then it, it's obvious, and then you know it hasn't come back. But when that doesn't occur then people just slide a little bit. That's it. Unless *they*- It's all up to them, there is no, there's no *net* really, that I have noticed at all.

She experiences the formal, distant mechanics of the student feedback process as an experience of further exclusion and alienation. Moreover, student feedback is analysed and interpreted by unknown others. She becomes dependent on these unknown others, whose motivations and actions are similarly opaque. She is left in a position where she feels that student feedback does not lead to change because she has not been able to control the way that the information has been interpreted. The experience of student feedback is disempowering:

Rachel: Do you think that you are in a position to change anything?

Student [6]: No not really. ... It's difficult because we should be in a position to change some of it, but it's difficult. Especially the ones that don't give out evaluation forms, or sometimes you think they give out evaluation forms but you don't know what they do with them or how much they accept the information that's on it. If they don't agree with what's being said and they think that the student's being over sensitive about something or trying to have a dig then they ignore it then, you know. If some people don't like what they hear then they'll cut it out rather than trying to deal with what they've heard.

Presence and absence; positions and relations: Students felt that lecturers regarded students as a temporary, homogeneous mass. Yet students experienced the student body as a community that is both homogeneous and heterogeneous. "Becoming part of the entirety" gives a sense of belonging: it identifies a student's sense of security once they have found their own niche and source of support. This sense of belonging is not the outcome of 'melding' in to an homogeneous mass:

Student [5]: It's about surviving 7000 people your own age, each as confused as each other, dumped in this, this community, this mixed hot-pot of people. You meet your friends and everything and you meet people, ... becoming part of a group, and becoming a part of the entirety ... You have got to look after yourself, because no one else is going to look out for you apart from your good friend.

This was important, in respect of the student's sense of alienation *within* the university and *from* their lecturers. Lecturers were not only *not* a source of social or personal support, but were also elusive:

Student [5]: The ideal way to be a lecturer would be to be someone who students look up to, respect, who know if they have got a problem you can go to them, they are very approachable. A lecturer's got to be someone who is very understanding. ... Part of authority is to help, you've got to help people. ... Most of the lecturers here you try and find them in the week and you can't. ... I tried in vain for an entire week, writing notes for him, knocking on his door 3 times a day every day. I've never been able to find him.

This next student asserts a cynical attitude to those who he feels *also regard him* with a level of cynicism. He suspects that the lecturers feel his motivations to study to be merely instrumental. He thinks the lecturer will find his position as student - as member of a temporary replaceable mass, and with relatively minimal expertise and lack of status as a scholar of the discipline - reason to discount student feedback. He feels that in an academic context one gains credibility, and legitimate 'voice' through demonstrating expertise and genuine interest in the discipline. He feels that lecturers are not well disposed to students' feedback because they perceive it to lack integrity in these respects:

Student [2]: They are the ones with the books published on the subject, you know. And maybe lecturers ask themselves, "Well these people are not here to contribute to the study of the field, they

are here to do 3 years of purgatory before they go out and get some money". And they therefore say, "Well next year's aren't going to be any different, why should we make that any better for them?" Perhaps that's just me being a right old cynic again! ... You know, to an extent perhaps I've given up trying to say anything, in terms of feedback because I've asked people in the year after me, whether anything had become of things that we'd asked about: "No". And I think it's just that I've been here so long, that I feel like part of the furniture- I'm smiling now because did I honestly ever think that things would change from feedback? ... I definitely don't think that I've changed things academically.

He expresses a strong sense of institutionalised inertia; student feedback does little to counter this culture, and does little to achieve change.

Attempting change: Students felt that their feedback should be put in a constructive way.

Students *have* picked up on the message about the nature of "academic truth" (Lecturer 11): feedback is constructive when it adheres to the norms of academic work.

Student [7]: It means conventions of writing, it means conventions of referencing and the rest of it.

... Our information has been that in academia you are not allowed to say anything that you cannot justify with background reading and quotation.

Student [2]: [students need to] put it in a constructive way, rather than just saying, "Well this is crap, this is crap, people don't like this, this could be done better".

Rachel: What do you mean, constructive?

Student [2]: I would say it's more about giving alternative suggestions. Highlighting areas that didn't work and explaining why they didn't work. And just generally giving means to improve, rather than just saying, "This could be improved" ... And you know maybe the lecturers themselves, because it's not constructive, don't take any notice of it.

Yet in this context, the process of completing a SEQ is experienced as difficult: there is insufficient time and space for considered, reasoned and evidenced argument. The SEQ is a methodology unsuited to its context.

Student [7]: They give you like 15 minutes. Some of it's really difficult. ... Some of the questions require you to think over what was the best, what was the worst, and those kind of things. And within a short period of reflection like that it's not easy. What you are likely to do is an intuitive thing. ... in the last 15 minutes you are being asked to look over a 15 week period perhaps, with a reading week in between, and your memory physically does not pick up quickly enough. ... Without having to sit down and go like, 'hmmm, let's take a step back, what have we been through?', the reflective process hasn't been allowed to happen so they get a reactive document rather than a reflective document.

This student also feels that the process of argumentation and explanation is a necessary part of maintaining good relations with her lecturers; the SEQ is also unhelpful in this respect:

Student [3]: I can understand that the lecturers might feel a bit exposed, which is why I don't like filling them out particularly. You are just making a specific judgement on these people by circling a number and it's a bit too divorced from anything else, because you don't write down, justify why you've circled that number so much really. A lot of people might circle a 1 and not write actually any comments afterwards. Not really justify why ... It's not quite so black and white like that. It's not just like, 'You're crap', it's more you think, 'I didn't find this particularly useful because', and it is more constructive then.

Her definition of being constructive, and her recognition of the necessity of being constructive contrasts with this lecturer's view of students' lack of awareness of, and sensitivity to, multiple viewpoints and pragmatic constraints:

Lecturer [16]: When you are 18, 19, 20 and maybe up to 25, it's very easy to categorise issues into black and white. ... Their lack of experience might contribute to their inability to see the drawbacks of what they're proposing sometimes. As they get older they begin to realise the world is not all black or all white, it's really just a great big ball of grey in the middle. ... as you get more experience [of life] you appreciate then that you can't categorise quite so evenly and simplistically as you would have done as a student - send all the troublemakers off to the moon or whatever.

The SEQ form of student feedback does not allow the student the time, space or process necessary to convince the lecturer that their views and proposed solutions are considered, tentative, grounded in evidence and mindful of constraints. It *forces* the student to arrive at

categorical statements and judgements, on which the *lecturer* then deliberates. The lecturer arbitrates the validity of the problem, and any proposed solution. This structure appears to reflect traditional assumptions about the student's role, position and disposition.

Lecturer [16]: I think we shouldn't dismiss the validity of student opinion, simply because the proposed solution which they attach to that is necessarily bizarre or whatever or extreme. I think we've got to look a bit further below the surface, and say, "Why are they concerned about this?". They'll learn, with greater experience of life in general, that it's not an easy solution.

The SEQ confirms a pattern of roles, positions and relations that the students both recognise, conform to and also find problematic. It reinforces, rather than changes a traditional picture of the culture and process of the university. It perpetuates a situation in which the students feel they have little status, control or influence.

Students suggest that student feedback has been incorporated into existing institutional culture and 'neutered'. For students, student feedback is not an effective lever of change; it does not symbolise a culture conducive to responsiveness and is unlikely to generate such a shift. Rather, student feedback is a practice that reflects and reproduces a culture that they characterise as hierarchical, inert and dismissive of students.

2.5. What change in organisational culture is sought?

If student feedback is to become an effective lever of change, students need to be convinced that the culture of the institution provides the conditions in which change is both possible and desired. The students' concepts of student feedback resonate with undertones of the inertia, complacency and hierarchy that they feel underpin university life. Each individual student felt a degree of isolation from, and anonymity within the institution: they did not feel as if they, or their views were of great significance to their lecturers. Moreover the experience of student feedback in the form of the SEQ reinforced these feelings: students identify a disparity between the form of argument that would be convincing and acceptable to their lecturers; the distant bureaucracy of the SEQ process leaves them with a feeling of disempowerment; they are unable to pursue communication as part of a social relationship with the lecturer.

When students are unconvinced that existing conditions and cultures of the university context are conducive to change, students will dismiss the value of the student feedback process. They may also mock an activity that demeans them. This provides one understanding of why students 'take a relaxed view ... cannot be bothered to fill in the questionnaires ... are reluctant to give time' (Bull 1990:32). However the more frequent interpretation is that the *student*, rather than the method, is the source of blame. This interpretation also reflects and reproduces traditional assumptions about students:

Comments tend to be unreflective, and often concern trivia. Most students won't

comment at all. It is extremely difficult to get an impression of the extent of problems. Comments tend to be negative and unconstructive. Students tend to blame lecturers and external constraints for problems they share responsibility for ... and fail to distinguish between problems lecturers are able to do something about and those which are relatively intractable (Gibbs 1982:28)

Yet many lecturers also suggested that it was reasonable for students to be dismissive about student feedback's potential; they felt that students rightly devalued a bureaucratic process in which their comments were reduced to a level of superficiality. Whilst some felt that the solution to student apathy was the refinement of procedures to 'feed back' to the students and affirm that changes had indeed been made, others identified that students' apathy towards questionnaires, and students' evident antipathy towards student feedback in general might well be a reflection of the broader context in which the activity took place:

Lecturer [4]: They don't think that we're interested so why should they be interested? And that is indeed true of some members of staff. ... If the institution throws you in a dark cubby hole, that's poorly temperature regulated, the staff are late, the handouts are badly prepared, it gives a whole impression that the institution and staff don't care. So why should the students care? ... [It's better when] we actually know the students ... you can build up some sort of genuine rapport. ... I think that this has been lost in a way with this centralisation and modularisation, where students are shunted round from lecture to lecture. They never get to know, and the staff never get to know a small group of students, where things can be discussed in an informal and non-threatening environment. The

exact opposite of that. ... If it's a scattered course with scattered staff and students you have to have a piece of paper. But then it just adds to the "Well I'm just a number and I'll just tick the boxes and it goes through a computer and nothing happens".

The lecturer identifies that the institutional culture has shifted, but that this has not come about through student feedback. Furthermore, he claims that the use of the SEQ mirrors an undercurrent culture in university work and study that is increasingly anonymous, atomised, technicised and administrative. The conditions through which previously, students were socialised into the institution through a process of intimate contact with members of academic staff, are being lost. The traditional process of socialisation might be critiqued from the point of view that it serves to reproduce conventional assumptions about social norms, roles and relations. I have shown that both students and lecturers perceive the barriers of hierarchical power relations to be exclusionary, and obstructive to inter-personal and communicative relationships. The problem appears to be that the assumptions that underpin, and the effect of, a bureaucratic-rational concept of organisation reinforce power differentials and relations.

The idea of student feedback provokes questions about whether, and what, change is desirable. The change identified as necessary and legitimate was described and justified by lecturers and students in terms that draw on the 'collegial' form of organisation.

Furthermore, many felt that the *processes* that would achieve the change desired would be those that are characteristic of the 'collegial' organisation. Students and lecturers wanted to

engage in debate and dialogue, rather than pursue alienating and divisive bureaucratic exercises. This viewpoint suggests that the values and interests that underpin the 'collegial' form of organisation are thought legitimate and beneficial. The view of change is that it is achieved by working with - rather than attacking - existing structures, processes and cultures. Such change may be slow, but any change achieved is more likely to be understood, agreed and sustainable.

2.6. Conclusion

Miller's argument is that universities are susceptible to the operation of both internal and external power dynamics. I argued in the previous chapter that students' and lecturers' ideas of student feedback are informed by perceptions of the externally defined, and internally enforced structures, processes and techniques. I also argued that their ideas are informed by a sense of an encroaching formality: this was considered both familiar and 'alien'. In this chapter I have argued that, to the degree that student feedback has been incorporated within institutions, both the newly 'formal' structures, processes and techniques, and the forces exerted by them are mediated through and existing structures, practices, norms and conventions. The 'alien' concept of student feedback has been integrated to the extent that it functions through the norms of the existing culture; it is tolerated as part of the 'status quo'.

Whilst students are disgruntled with some aspects of this culture, and with the idea that these seem somehow entrenched, students accept their experiences as an 'inevitable' status quo. Thus asking students for their views appears, to them, a paradoxical, if not also purposeless, activity. Rather than assist students' participation within an inclusive democracy, and empower their 'voice', the concept of student feedback commensurate with ideas of 'good practice' achieves the reverse. It formalises existing power relations and structures a further relation of dependency and control. It further alienates the student from the institutional and academic contexts in which they study. Student feedback is a means by which the 'status quo' is legitimated and ossified.

Miller's description of relative power reflects the operation of an hegemony, in which the phenomenon of an oppressive 'status-quo' is brought about by the oppressed themselves; it is not the product of an overt use of force. Whilst students acknowledge their own apathy, they also imply a degree of complicity in accepting the inevitability of a 'status quo', in conforming to the norms they feel acceptable and appropriate.

However the idea of change *is implicit* to lecturers' and students' views. It is suggested in expressions of friction and tension. The force of change is experienced in the negative through the frustration of the SEQ. Student feedback represents change at the level of implementing 'formal' structures and procedures. Both students and lecturers suggest that the external environment produces internal conditions - including the structures and procedures of student feedback - that stand in tension with the conditions that they

themselves believe facilitate 'responsiveness' within the university. Student feedback is a concept of 'communication' that conflicts with socially contingent processes of interaction and exchange; it stands in tension with lecturers' and students' ideas that 'responsiveness' is best achieved at the level of inter-personal dialogue.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER THREE

Redefining professional identity: the academic as teacher

The Government has decided that the most effective way of funding higher education is to ... permit elements of institutional funding to be linked with assessments of quality (DES 1991:13).

HEFCE Circular 26/95.

The aspects of provision will be used by subject providers in the preparation of self-assessments and by assessors in structuring the assessment visit, considering the evidence and making their judgements in a graded profile. ... The self-assessment provides evidence for assessing the quality of the student learning experience and student achievement ... Evidence to support statements is an important part of a self-assessment. ... **Quality assurance and enhancement. Key features:** evidence from HEQC audit; subject provider-level internal quality assurance (for example curriculum or course review, feedback mechanisms); staff development related to teaching and learning; appraisal of teaching skills (HEFCE 1995:19, 21).

An analysis of a self-assessment will include consideration of the following generic matters as well as subject specific issues: ...

13. Are the views of students properly taken into account? (HEFCE n.d.:13-14).

In order to ensure that appraisals focused on an individual's contribution to teaching and students' learning, it was suggested that institutions consider ways in which appraisers ... had access to relevant information relating to performance in teaching and learning, including that which is available from student questionnaires. ... Staff had discussed the issue of what constituted suitable evidence and criteria for the appraisal of teaching performance, and the outcomes of student questionnaires from annual course reviews were considered to be adequate (HEQC 1996b:69).

Rachel: Is that why they have been introduced - to assess the lecturer?

Lecturer [13]: Well, I know why they were introduced, they were introduced under the 'teaching quality' heading, in terms of trying to 'monitor the quality of the learning experience' that students are getting.

Rachel: Very grand.

Lecturer [13]: Yes, (laugh). Yes I've learnt all the phrases - I need all these for the HEFCE (laugh). Now I don't know whether any of my colleagues perceive them as Big Brother watching them. They might do. I am sure some people do. I mean if somebody felt they weren't a good lecturer, I'm sure they might perceive this as Big Brother getting at them yes. There are people who enjoy lecturing and will therefore probably get high scores. They probably like it, it's a pat on the back.

Introduction

This chapter considers student feedback from the perspective of its role in the process of reconstructing academic professional self-identity. Contemporary higher education emphasises performance in respect of both the teaching and research roles of the academic; student feedback is part of a set of mechanisms that subject the teaching performance of the academic to scrutiny both internally by managers and during external inspections by the HEFCE and the HEQC.

First, I discuss the question of professional identity in higher education. I draw on the idea of the 'professional project'; this aids conceptualisation of what might represent an active attempt to threaten claims to 'professionalism' and to undermine the academic 'profession'. Second, I argue that lecturers identify student feedback as an assault on, and as an insult to, their professional identity. Third, I show that students understand the terms 'lecturer' and 'teacher' to imply very different sets of attitudes, interests and competencies. Student feedback is a confusing activity, because lecturers are not *supposed* to be good teachers. Thus lecturers cannot be judged against expectations of the attributes, attitudes and competencies that this identity would imply. Fourth, I argue that lecturers judgements of student feedback are expressed in terms that demonstrate a sense of professionalism. Lecturers engage in student feedback because they are committed to the demands of both subject discipline and of students. The method of student feedback used most frequently is found by both students and lecturers to be of little value. Fifth, I discuss how lecturers' judgements of the relevance and utility of students' judgements are drawn in terms of the demands of the subject discipline and in terms of a deliberative approach to evaluating their practice as teachers. Sixth, I argue

that the dominant method of student feedback is tolerated precisely because it is irrelevant to lecturers' practice: this deflects both assault and insult.

The chapter concludes that student feedback is a concept of threat and ambiguity.

Student feedback requires students to make judgements about qualities they feel uncharacteristic of the academic profession. For lecturers, the use of a method that is superficial and that generates meaningless and partial accounts of the professional's practice is a burden. Yet it is also useful: it obviates the challenge to professional identity that student feedback presents, and deflects both the assault and the insult it implies.

3.1. The academic as professional

The redefinition of professional self-identity: Parker and Jary (1995:324) view the 'McDonaldisation' of the university as a process that is 'necessarily predicated on weakening professional control structures in order to intensify professional labour'. They argue that whilst the status of the academic as a 'professional' is under threat, 'the epithet professional is not merely an occupational category, but a valued self-identity ... It is one that will not easily be given up' (1995:328). However, Nixon (1996:5) maintains that,

Higher education is facing a crisis which, in part at least, is a crisis of professional self-identity. To describe the situation in this way at once highlights the

vulnerability of university teachers as an occupational group, while at the same time insisting that the reconstruction of their own professional identity is a precondition of the restructuring of higher education.

Whilst it might be argued that the self-identity of the academic as professional is under threat and/or flux, in order to identify and understand this process what is required is an adequate concept of the meaning of professionalism in higher education. This, 'necessarily involves a serious debate regarding the values upon which any claim to professionalism might be based' (Nixon 1996:5).

Scrutinising professionalism, controlling professionals: Drawing on the work of Friedson and Larson, Macdonald (1995) defines the factors that influence the development of an occupation as a profession. This is an analysis that differs from one which focuses on the 'traits' of a profession. The latter would be a focus on the 'rights' that the professional assumes, such as trust, autonomy and freedom, or the 'duties' which the professional should observe, such as responsibility and commitment to the ethical and service nature of their work. This second analysis will be returned to in respect of the focus of the assault and insult that lecturers perceive student feedback to represent.

Macdonald argues that the development of a profession is an on-going process; it is a 'professional project'. The 'professional project' is contingent on: obtaining sponsorship by a powerful state elite; obtaining a level of social prestige; and the

development of a normative and cognitive domain with explicit boundaries, this also provides qualifications for/limits on membership. The normative and cognitive domain is used, by a successful profession, for the production of an ideology. An ideology defines the social reality in that area of work; it forms the basis of validity claims concerning work processes and outcomes; it is used to define the standards by which competence is judged; and, it is used to define the extent to which the 'laity' has purchase on the domain itself. Finally, the profession depends on the continued 'marketability' of its normative and cognitive resources (Macdonald 1995:8-9).

An active attempt at 'de-professionalisation' might be evidenced by attempts to disrupt and dismantle the conditions on which the 'professional project' is contingent. Within higher education, strategies that seek to reduce the power, control and autonomy of the academic profession will be effected by influencing change in the aforementioned nexus of political, social, cultural and economic conditions. It will attempt to undermine what it is that supports and legitimates claims that higher education is a field and form of knowledge and work that requires 'professional' practice. It will attempt to undermine the professional's claims to the rights and obligations that they assert are both due and necessary to their practice.

Government policy witnesses the break-down of the State sponsored tacit trust-agreement with the higher education profession. Government discourse derides the profession such that its social prestige is undermined and any public consensus over its role and competence brought into question. Moreover, government rhetoric alleges that the normative and cognitive domain of the profession is inadequate to meet social and

economic needs. In respect of teaching, the solutions identified by government policy involve attempts to legitimate the claim of the 'laity' to redefine the boundaries and purposes of academic work and to enable external judgement of professional competence; the grip of academic 'ideology' must be loosened. Finally, these pressures and judgements are the means by which to reconstruct the 'market' for the provision of higher education teaching.

If a system for the scrutiny of a professional's work is constructed and defined using criteria external to the 'cognitive and normative' domain of the profession, the professional is subject to extra-professional judgements. The processes of scrutiny in which student feedback plays a part necessitate and imply a set of objects and criteria for evaluation. These objects and criteria are both explicit and implicit to the particular method used to generate student feedback, and to the structures and processes through which that information is channelled. They are reflected in the uses and purposes of that information. In so far as student feedback operates according to principles, values and interests defined by government, and is designed to allow the student 'laity' greater powers to influence the process and content of academic work, student feedback might be argued to play a part in weakening the conditions of 'the professional project'.

Student feedback raises questions concerning the professional practice of the academic as teacher; it throws into doubt the academic professional's right to jurisdiction over teaching and learning. Macdonald (1995:163) interprets 'jurisdiction' as the claim to legitimate authority and control in the definition of a particular problem. Jurisdiction grants the professional sole rights 'to classify a problem, to reason about it and to take

action on it: in more formal terms, to diagnose, to infer and to treat' (Abbott 1988:30).

If students' judgements have sanctionable consequence or are assigned status within the organisational context for academic's work, the academic becomes subject to the pressure or obligation to alter teaching practices with reference to these others' non-professional 'diagnoses, inferences and proposals of action'.

The design and content of a student feedback method reflect criteria for, and assumptions about what 'good teaching' is. The concept of 'good teaching' that is reflected in the method of student feedback, and in the way in which the resultant information is handled, reflect the profession's cognitive and normative domain - or 'professional knowledge' - of teaching. Thus the selection of design and content of student feedback is a key issue within the definition, and redefinition of the cognitive and normative domain of professional teaching in higher education. In this sense, the specification of select criteria might evidence a new definition of the cognitive and normative domain of 'good teaching'. The key issue here is who designs the system of student feedback, and on the basis of which criteria and assumptions.

3.2. Lecturers' self-identity as teachers: judging the amateurs?

Subject experts: In principle, a lecturer's claim to the status and identity of professional teacher is already undermined by the lack of a formal teaching qualification. The lecturer has achieved success and recognition - and has thus gained the right of access to the academic profession - on the basis of expertise in a subject-

discipline, rather than through proven, formally recognised, success and expertise as a teacher. The lecturer's cognitive and normative domain is the subject discipline; it is that over which the lecturer has jurisdiction:

Lecturer [3]: I think in terms of perhaps subject knowledge then I think the lecturer does know best, and if they didn't then they shouldn't be here.

Rachel: Are students' comments always valid?

Lecturer [4]: Well they were probably valid the minute they made them. But then you're looking for long term- That comes to another point of view, which is to some extent, "Do students know what's good for them?". You know, "This is going to hurt but it'll do you good". Yes. Or, "We're older and wiser and we know better".

Lecturer [7]: But certainly I wasn't very impressed with the questionnaire, shall we say (laugh). No, it asked a lot of questions I wasn't remotely interested in. ... I think it depends again on the exact context, of what you are trying to do. Maybe I want them to find it difficult. But if it's difficult and they can do it, that's much better than it being easy. ... What you want to know is whether they can do it or not. And there wasn't a question like that. I think it would be very difficult to extract an answer on a scale of 1 to 5 how well you understood the course - because there are students who have not got a blind clue of whether they understood anything about the course or not, but still think they did. ... What is obvious to the student, as far as what is being done in the lecture, may not be what's actually being taught.

Lecturer [2]: I have a couple of second year courses which are on topics that are conceptually quite difficult, particularly as they involve mathematics, which tends to be an area which people tend not to like. And for a long time I was getting poor responses and I tended to assume that it was because [the courses] were difficult. ... The fact that I actually find that sort of mathematical side relatively speaking easy- It was difficult for me to see why they weren't capturing what I was on about.

Researchers and teachers: A lecturer may interpret their own institutional context as one that encourages and rewards research. In this sense, the lecturer is an academic who defines their job in terms of research, rather than places emphasis on teaching. This lecturer describes how, to him, it appears both necessary and valuable to define his identity using the term 'academic'; for him, the title 'lecturer' denotes 'teacher'. In the light of this, the lecturer is less 'Janus faced' teacher/researcher (c.f. Nixon 1996:7), than a professional whose identity is defined in terms of his research.

Lecturer [15]: I think that the academic staff here are members of an intelligent community, and their job descriptions do include teaching. My feeling is that the vast majority of them want to do that as well as they can, I think they would regard it as part of their professionalism, yes. I mean most of them after all are appointed as university lecturers. Yet the difficulty is that as a title that means almost nothing. Generally speaking at least, the emphasis of that title is equal between research and teaching, so they are university researchers and lecturers. Yet in many cases they are university researchers with 'lecturer' in very small letters indeed. ... I think in the main they would not regard themselves as professional teachers, they would regard themselves as

academics. ... I mean a disastrous career path in this institution would be to not do much research and to do mainly teaching, that would be a disastrous career path, and that would not work, you would be in endless trouble all the time.

In contrast (and within the same institution), a lecturer may feel that “It is important to me. I made a conscious decision a long time ago, and I wasn’t going to play the game” (Lecturer 10). For her, the definition of her professional identity is a question of values, choices, and consequent questions of time allocation. This next lecturer expresses a similar perspective:

Lecturer [4]: I was appointed to lecture [subject]. To be a young dynamic member of staff who pulls in lots of research money, whilst doing lots of teaching, which is a bit of a bad deal, I later discovered. People manage to do one or the other, but very rarely both. Unless they are exceptionally well motivated.

Alternatively, many identified that the lecturer’s identity as teacher is simply taken for granted, and subsumed as one of the assumptions about a researcher’s capacities:

Lecturer [10]: I think one of the problems with this job is that you assume that if you know something about a subject then you may as well teach it. Whereas nobody lets anybody near primary school students without making them do a training course first. Here, people are thrown into the deep end and they get absolutely no advice in any formal capacity, or a course. You know they arrive and they’ve never taught anything before, they are maybe aged 24 and they’ve done a PhD and they’re told, “Right you’re doing [subject] tutorials”. And they may in the first

year be given 4 or 5 lectures; "Go away and prepare them". ... Research is the more rewarding activity. If you are good at administration that's respected, if you are good at teaching, it's like having red hair or something - some one assumes that you've got it, but, "Get on with the job!".

Teaching, as a 'cognitive and normative domain' of professional 'knowledge' has little status. Many referred to an assumption - and believed it widely shared - that discipline-knowledge is first-order knowledge. On the basis of this assumption, teaching is considered second-order knowledge. Becoming a lecturer is a reflection of being 'clever'; the assumption consequent on this is that the development of teaching is 'easy' and well within the capacity of the subject-expert researcher. This lecturer questions such assumptions:

Lecturer [6]: I think a lot of the problems for lecturers, is that when you start you really don't know what you are doing. You get to university and you become a lecturer, and it's just assumed that you can do it, because you've done some research, and you're clever. Therefore you will be able to teach. And I think that's a major obstacle for a lot of lecturers because they are not sure about what they are doing when they start. And they can get into very bad habits which just get perpetuated year after year, decade after decade, doing the same stuff, over and over again.

Student feedback and the 'lecturer as teacher'; loss of face: Student feedback assumes that the lecturer has knowledge about and competence in teaching. The assumption of a well developed sense of professional dominion in teaching in higher education appears ill-founded:

Lecturer [6]: Am I in a position to analyse what teaching should be? You know, I don't know what 'it is'. There's this attitude either you can do it or you can't, but I haven't got much exposure to it. I haven't had much exposure to it and different sorts of teaching and whatever.

In this context, student feedback represents a pressure on the lecturer *to* develop as a professional teacher, rather than to focus on research. This is indeed the allegation represented in, and the reorientation sought through student feedback.

These three lecturers suggest two contrasting concerns. One is an expression of concern for teaching an acknowledgement of a need for continual development. In contrast, and in the context of a lack of security about teaching expertise, student feedback is experienced as unfair judgementalism, and represents the threat that known shortcomings and professional *incompetence* might be exposed.

Student feedback is a risk. First, there is the potential that the lecturer's standing as supposed expert teacher is revealed as a myth:

Lecturer [6]: I think people do find it quite threatening.

Rachel: Why do you think that is?

Lecturer [6]: Because as I say they're worried about their teaching, they're worried about the effectiveness of their teaching. They're worried about actually being exposed as having problems with their teaching. It goes for everyone. Everybody knows, I think, the shortcomings in their own teaching- You know you live in this constant fear of being 'found out' (laugh). Someone's

going to cotton on to what you're doing that's wrong. And here is a form given out to people, inviting them to criticise you, and that's threatening, and frightening in many ways.

Second, student feedback potentially undermines the lecturer's status as a professional.

This is experienced and expressed as the risk that the lecturer's reputation, as determined and perceived by the lecturer's peers, might be damaged:

Lecturer [15]: If we are not careful, comments might make staff very unsympathetic, and very nervous, and a lot of staff are very nervous about questionnaires received.

Rachel: Why do you think that is?

Lecturer [15]: Because their reputation can be very badly damaged.

Lecturer [10]: The University is starting to set up some sort of training process, ... some of which is now highly recommended, but they don't necessarily recommend to the Head of Department that they give their time to do it. ... I think it's harder for the people who are already senior. ... There are quite a few senior people who can't teach, and they get the 2s, 2 and a half's, or even less, as low as 1. But it would be a great loss of face for them to go off to a training course, with lots of 23, 24 year olds to learn how to teach. So they wouldn't, they would not do it, they wouldn't go to the training course. ...

Rachel: So staff development would be seen as remedial?

Lecturer [10]: Yes, remedial and optional.

Tests and sanctions: Student feedback was often spoken about as a 'test' of professional competence, to which sanctions were attached. These sanctions might be experienced as managerial, social or personal:

Rachel: What's the departmental purpose for the information?

Lecturer [7]: I haven't been party to any of the discussions, but I imagine that it's just to monitor- Keep tabs on people and make sure they're not doing an abysmal job.

Lecturer [13]: The feedback goes to the lecturer concerned, but also to the head of department. If somebody is getting awful scores that said they can't teach, the Head of Department has to know about that and, if needs be, will raise this at the member of staff's next appraisal meeting.

...

Rachel: Will they ever be sort of semi-publicly discussed, say at a meeting?

Lecturer [13]: Well that's a good point. There are some people in the university who say that we ought to have a, you know a 'hit-list'; that the worst lecturers should be pilloried (laugh), awful scores broadcast on notice boards (laugh).

Rachel: Speaking ironically?

Lecturer [13]: Well no I think some people are actually serious! (laugh). Not in this department I have to say. I don't think that's right. ... I mean I generally get quite high scores, but I still don't like it if I see some negative comments, I get quite upset. We have to have very thick skins.

These lecturers did not appear to perceive the focus of the activity as a form of positive encouragement, intended to facilitate professional development in teaching. In contrast, student feedback was discussed as a mechanism designed to catch the lecturer out and

justify the application of sanctions. The metaphor of the “Big Brother” (Lecturer 13) infers a punitive culture of observation and conformism. This produces a level of paranoia that leads to evasion or devious practices:

Lecturer [10]: The way it works now is the people who get good staff evaluation forms use them, you know for promotion and show them around, people who don't get good ones throw them in the bin. ... They say that the student has written the form, based on an understanding that it is a confidential 2 way process between the individual student and the individual staff member and it is not for any body else's eyes. ... But on the whole the people who most object to doing anything with student feedback are the teachers who over a long period of time the students have always identified as being not very good teachers.

Student feedback is experienced as personally hurtful and damaging because, “You often find out rather hurtful things about yourself. And it's very damaging to see those. ... It can offend and your ego is damaged” (Lecturer 11).

Lecturer [15]: You have got to be very careful that questionnaires don't damage the people who are the recipients of it. And they can be very damaging, and I know many colleagues who have been deeply hurt by student questionnaire returns, and definitely don't teach any better for it.

Now you could say, “Oh they should be mature enough to shrug this off”. Well that's looking for a level of maturity that doesn't exist, except perhaps in those bits of the community who have been nailed to crosses, or who have been beatified by one or other of the churches. For most people comment can be very hurtful.

The discourse of being 'monitored', 'kept tabs on', 'found out', 'pilloried', 'threatened', 'hurt', and of 'losing face' represents an experience of student feedback that is profoundly negative. The experience generates friction, anger, dissent and defensiveness; student feedback becomes a pejorative term.

Assaults and insults; questioning and revealing professionalism: These extracts do not suggest that negativity about student feedback centres on perceptions of a loss of trust, autonomy or freedom. If it did, this would imply that that lecturers experience student feedback as a tool that challenges the 'traits' that characterise a professional's rights and identity. In contrast, the negativity surrounding student feedback is a reflection of the consequences of bad results for the personal ego and reputation amongst colleagues within the department. Student feedback is an *assault* because implicitly, it calls into question the legitimacy of claims to professionalism, because it is a challenge experienced as punitive, and is also personally hurtful.

This suggests first, that the lecturer's experience of student feedback is one informed by the pressures exerted within a peer culture, by an assumption of expertise, and by an ethical commitment to ensuring personal excellence; these are pressures that are *characteristic of* the nature and conditions of 'professional' work. Second, student feedback is more than assault: lecturers also derided student feedback on the basis that it was *insulting*. It is insulting in the sense that it is an unjustified challenge to professional identity: it brings into question many skills, knowledge, competencies, aspirations and values about which lecturers are confident. Furthermore, student

feedback is an insult because the concept of 'good teaching' reflected in the criteria assessed do not match up to lecturers' own definitions of professionalism. The 'insult' represented by student feedback infers a strong idea of what, for them, constitutes professionalism in teaching.

The next part of this chapter considers students' assessments of the lecturer as teacher. The subsequent parts examine the internal motivations and standards that lecturers express in connection with student feedback, professional teaching and the professional teacher. These might be used to identify what constitutes professionalism in teaching in higher education.

3.3. Students concept of the lecturer: judging the indifferent teacher?

Students differentiate between the terms 'lecturer' and 'teacher':

Student [4]: I think there should be a bit more sort of, of that 'teacher relationship' as opposed to just lecturing.

Rachel: What's the difference between the two?

Student [4]: Well a lecturer just, is like a robot, it could be a video you could be watching, just imparting information, you're receiving it, taking it away, consuming it. Whereas a teacher invokes a love for the subject within, and creates discussion. You walk out of the lecture, "God yes what a good point, but!", and like you continue the discussion later.

Experts and researchers: Students felt that the 'lecturer' is an expert, who is not necessarily supposed to be a teacher, or concerned with the student as an individual. The lecturer is a person committed to, and with a vocation for their subject:

Student [6]: I mean the Americans moan about it in the fact that they have more structured teaching regimes I think. They moan, "We come over here and all you do is sit down, no one teaches you". I don't think it's wrong. I think that universities should be very different from what you did at school. ... The lecturers are interested in their subject. I don't mean it as in they are just interested in their subject, but that they want to pass it around. They are interested in imparting that information onto you. So they are interested in you as the collective you, rather than separately. Some are interested in you separately and some of them are more interested than others, but just because they are not interested in listening to your problems doesn't mean that they are a bad lecturer, in some ways. ... If they are interested in imparting all their information onto you as the collective, and they want to do that and they try to do that to the best of their abilities then- You know that's good. ... [One of my lecturers] gives a lecture- He loves the subject, and you are all waiting for the next time he jumps off his little platform, or does a little jump because he's got so into it that he just gets carried away and falls over. It does strike off with you, "Well there must be something in this- If he is that interested in this there must be something in it" (laugh).

The students' assumption appeared to be that a lecturer's concern for the individual student is an exception. A lecturer is generally "interested in getting a set amount of money for teaching and then going on and doing what they love, which is research, to be honest" (Student 5). Most of the students felt that what marked the difference between a

lecturer and a teacher was the loss of interaction and relationship, and a sense that the lecturer was differently motivated - the lecturer had a greater interest in the discipline. Yet although the lecturer-teacher distinction was expressed as a negative - as a lack - there were aspects to the definition of a 'lecturer' that were positive. For instance, the expert researcher is also an authoritative, impressive person:

Student [4]: You are sitting there and your text book is, "Look! it's written by my lecturer, shit, I can't plagiarise!" (laugh). I think ... the School is very well thought of within the country, I feel sort of quite privileged. You do think, "These people know what they are doing". You know, because one of the books that we had for my A level [subject], she's a lecturer *here*. And she was like my God at A level. I felt a bit overcome by it really- They're definitely quite impressive I'd say.

Rachel: They are better teachers?

Student [4]: No that's not necessarily true, I think [Lecturer X] who did this book, she just reads her notes, just reads it off. And like she's got great points and stuff like that, but her lecturing ability isn't that great.

Often, students reconciled that their experiences of lecturers' teaching were neither out of the ordinary, unexpected, nor abnormal:

Student [1]: I enjoyed it, he made it fun, he had a lot of examples, like real life examples, that weren't necessarily connected to what he was teaching but they got you thinking, which a lot of lecturers don't. They're just very dull. They try and write, they write up as much as they can in the hour. ... And I am sure some of them haven't had training in how to teach. They've just got

there because they know their subject - I don't know whether that is the case, but you get that impression.

Normal folk: Students' explanations for why the lecturer is not necessarily going to be a teacher also reflect common assumptions about the nature of social life, and the attributes of different sorts of people. The students drew on these assumptions to rationalise their experiences of different lecturers. For example, the 'tenured experts' tended to be old; old people are not necessarily going to behave in terms familiar or amenable to a younger generation:

Student [1]: I am saying that I'm quite happy with it, and I know it's not going to be perfect, I don't think it's going to be perfect. I mean these people who are like 60 or 70 years old- They've been lecturing this way for years. You know they're good: they can talk well, write well and you can understand it. The fact that they're not interacting with the class so much is perhaps- Like the new generation of lecturers is not really a problem. ... There are researchers who are very good researchers, but they're just not going to be able to relate to younger people.

Lecturers are simply individuals, with their own idiosyncrasies, about which judgement is unfair. Moreover such judgements would merely reflect the individual student's *preferences* for different sorts of people; lecturers are people whom one might like or dislike:

Student [3]: I was worried about slating the lecturer, especially if I liked the lecturer. ... You know it is a very subjective thing, isn't it. ... I mean I know a lot of people would like one lecturer and a lot of people wouldn't like the same lecturer. It's a very subjective thing, so I should think that students all fill in their forms totally differently, whereas it's all about personal feelings towards a lecturer, I suppose.

Thus, across a range of lecturers, there will be those who are good, bad and indifferent:

Student [6]: [I've had a] wide range of experiences of different lecturers. You know there are good lecturers, bad lecturers, appalling lecturers and you know middle of the road. Most of the teaching that I have had [here] has been, on the lecturing level, good. Um, there have been a few that have been slightly bizarre, and there's been a few when I'm sure it was us (laugh), rather than the lecturer, when you have got no idea what's going on.

The 'lecturer as teacher': Their experience of a 'good teacher' was a person who is responsive, caring and who spares time and effort for students' general and educational well-being. A 'good teacher' is also an authority - a role model who exerts control and inspires confidence. This student offers a description of the attributes of a 'teacher', and then the necessary attributes of a lecturer. He indicates that the lecturer should also share the attributes of a teacher - but then suggests that this is uncommon:

Student [5]: Makes a good teacher? Somebody who can relate well to students but in a way that they certainly remain the authority. The ideal way to be a teacher would be to be someone

who students look up to, respect, who know if they have got a problem you can go to them, they are very approachable. ... You know you have got to inspire confidence. ... You've got to have someone who's strong, who will stand at the front of the lecture theatre and will project their voice so that everyone can hear, you've got to speak clearly. ... A lecturer's got to be someone who is very understanding with pupils. Um, I don't think most of them are.

Students' characterisations of the lecturer suggest three contrasting points of view.

First, the *role* of the lecturer is seen in homogeneous terms. Second, there is an homogeneity to the *identity* of the lecturer: the lecturer is an expert researcher and seldom a teacher. Third, the lecturer is a *person*, replete with heterogeneous idiosyncrasies. Students' characterisations suggest that students neither expect a common standard of teaching, nor identify a single standard by which to judge the lecturer's competence. Students' experiences of student feedback reflect these contrasting points of view:

Rachel: What are they for do you think, these forms?

Student [6]: To help the lecturers hopefully (laugh) in structuring their courses, or the course organisers.

Rachel: Do you think that they do?

Student [6]: I don't know. I think that the ones that are good course organisers, course lecturers do. But unfortunately the ones that aren't don't. But usually what you find is that people who aren't very good lecturers don't give them out unfortunately, you know. Because usually the ones that have more participation are the people who are doing it right.

Students' attitudes towards student feedback also reflect their assessments of the distinctions between the lecturer and the teacher, and the assumptions that underpin these. One factor in this is the method employed: the lecturer's choice between interactive, or non interactive methods informs students perceptions of whether a lecturer is a 'teacher' or not. Students' perspectives are also an influence on their approaches to giving student feedback. If the format and conditions for the feedback activity signal to the student that the lecturer is a 'good teacher', the student will be more motivated, and will make efforts to give high quality student feedback:

Student [1]: The lecturer I mentioned earlier, he chose 30 people at random to meet with him every couple of weeks to discuss how the course was going. You would go and see him and talk about it. I can't remember what I wrote, but I remember writing a long list- I wrote a long letter to him, anonymously, so I don't know what his response was. And I think quite a few people did because he was asking for it. He was obviously really concerned that he was teaching well, and he would listen, you could tell that, so he would listen to whatever you had to say. A lot of people, even if they didn't like his teaching, they definitely liked his motives, they definitely saw that he was the most concerned for us, and the most teacher-like of the lecturers.

Students and lecturers; the teacher as redundant: Students' expectations of the lecturer are also defined relative to their ideas about their own role as students. Students accept that they are responsible for their own success. This means that they have to work out themselves how to learn effectively and to develop a capacity for independence and hard work; this means that they will meet the lecturer's expectations:

Student [7]: You are going into a place where you are now having to take control of your learning, and you are a responsible adult, and you need to do that.

Student [4]: The level of independent study for a degree is a lot greater than that of an HND, a lot greater ... You are left to your own devices somewhat. Which is a bit daunting at first. ... And everyone sort of said, "This is going to be the hardest 2 years of your life. You know, you are going to have to get down, you have got to work. And I thought, "That's me, I'm going to get down there and I am going to study there's no stopping me". ... You are sort of, once you have left the lecture, very much on your own I think. I'm sure you can track someone down, but ultimately I think you need to be more independent anyway. I think it's better.

Student [6]: I mean I like independence- ... I like to do my bit and get on with it and do my work and that's fine with me. I work better like that. ... It's not as if I'm trying to cling to a school mentality that we should all be in a little group together and everything should be hunky-dory. ...

Rachel: Do you mean that you have to be also responsible about making sense of the whole experience for yourself?

Student [6]: Yes, yes I suppose so, you know. Because you are not assessed all the way through you have to try and assess yourself.

In this sense, the lecturer becomes almost an irrelevance. Alternatively, the student might feel indifferent to the way the lecturer teaches because it is possible to pass a course without participation in that teaching:

Student [1]: A subject like [this], I don't really need to go to many lectures because all the lecturers are doing in most of the subjects is just writing everything on the board. So everyone has got the same lecture notes, and you can learn just as much from copying someone else's notes at a later date. ... Certainly at the undergraduate level there is not a lot of thinking, actually discovering things for yourself and thinking for yourself. It's a lot more, "Learn these methods". ... I don't see that as a bad thing, I just see that as the way [the subject] is.

Judgement of the indifferent teacher: One lecturer characterised student feedback as an approach to educational evaluation that was premised on a public discourse of blaming the teacher for failures in learning:

Lecturer [11]: The role relationships in schools are very much that it is the teacher's responsibility to 'learn' the pupils. So you know and everybody believes this, that if the pupils are doing badly, it is the school that's at fault, it's the teacher's fault.

However it is clear from these extracts from students, that students do not 'blame' the lecturer. Both the lecturer, and the students feel it inappropriate in higher education. Nevertheless, none of the students were unaware, or uncritical, of their experiences of what they judged 'bad' teaching, or 'unprofessional' work. These instances tended to surround issues of inter-personal contact and relationships: the moments when they had needed support and not found it; when they needed - and not received - interaction in the classroom in order to understand something better; when lecturer's presentations in lectures implied lack of preparation, communicative awareness, or thought for students'

present understandings; and, when they perceived the lecturer to be patronising, disdainful or continually aloof and elusive. What they found difficult to establish were the means to express this, and the degrees to which change was possible, or likely. Students suggest that the SEQ does not enable the student to engage in an educational, or socially appropriate and rewarding relationship with the lecturer as a teacher. I return to these issues in Chapters 4 and 6.

3.4. Lecturers' self-identity as teachers: the value basis of professionalism

Professionalism and professionalism: One lecturer felt that student feedback questions her professionalism - her commitment to and success in maintaining high standards of work - and insinuates a lack of competence, or 'professionalism'.

Lecturer [11]: Well of course there is a down side to this, you know. ... The down side is that you often find out rather hurtful things about yourself. And it's very damaging to see those. It's not nice for me as a professional to read one of these which says, you know, "What a muddle, you'd never get away with this in a primary school", for example. ... You're inviting comments on your professional practice. You're inviting comments on your professionalism. And the professionalism I can hack, I don't think I am a magic teacher. So if somebody says, "You should have done it this way, and this way, and this way, it would make more sense", then I'd say, "Oh great, good idea". ... Thinking in that way I can accept it. But there is another little demon lurking in here, which is, I will not have people attacking my professionalism. So I think that this

is a very 2-edged sword ... by doing this you are inviting comment on your professionalism - which is what the students are interacting with - but you will also consider it from the point of view of your professionalism.

Student feedback represents an *assault* on her professionalism. She also finds it *insulting* to receive criticism of professionalism, and yet feels that the professional must learn to tolerate this criticism. Finally, she finds that the idea of 'good teaching' implicit to the methods is crude and inaccurate. This is an *insulting* definition of professionalism:

Lecturer [11]: Most of the instruments which are used aren't worth the paper they were written on, they ask about trivial aspects of their professionalilty: "Was the writing legible?, was the tutor audible?". ... The end of term student evaluation questionnaires really cannot get the kind of feedback on professionalism that I think is useful to strengthen it. ... You know and lots of the questions that are asked on these questionnaires, [e.g. "Was he well prepared"] I think are opaque to the members of the class, because they are not privy to the doing of them. What they are privy to is the delivery point, and that is something that they understand. Whether it works, whether it doesn't work.

Most of the questions asked are 'trivial'. In this sense, she suggests that both the activity and the results might therefore be dismissed as unimportant. Both activity and results become non-threatening. The lecturer is confident of her professionalism, and has an active sense of her competence in this regard. She requires that students trust her professional competence and commitment to apply her skills in the areas that are

opaque to them. She has a clear definition of 'professionalism' in teaching. Her self-identity as a professional teacher is valued and self-assured.

Listening and concern: The interviews demonstrate evidence that each lecturer *was* willing to review their own work as a teacher. Listening to students was considered an essential part of this process.

Rachel: Do you find those [tutorial] meetings useful?

Lecturer [13]: Yes I do. As first year tutor it provides me with a feeling of what's going right and what's going wrong with that degree. And I do teach first years anyway, so I tend to see them in that context in my own subject as well. Oh yes it is very important to have the dialogue, I mean communication with students.

Lecturer 11 defined professionalism in higher education as a commitment to students, expressed as openness to criticism and a willingness to develop her 'professionalism'. Others also shared her point of view. Concern for students appears to be a fundamental value of professionalism in higher education; it is expressed as listening to students in order to gain information of value to the development of teaching practices and of courses. The lecturers were concerned for students, and concerned that the teaching was of benefit both to the students' learning and to their wider development in higher education. Listening and responding to students is an expression of these concerns:

Lecturer [10]: It's really just questions to try and spark the students off into being critical or to praise as they want. A lot of it is done verbally, and we just make notes of the sorts of things that students have said, and try and take it on board. The thing about a course like [this] is, because it is optional, and because we want it to survive, it is very important for us to design the course to be as amenable as possible to students, so that students feel as though they're really getting something out of it.

Lecturer [6]: If a class goes badly then I think lecturers really should ask what it is that the lecturer is doing wrong, rather than why the students aren't saying anything. Or why people are playing noughts and crosses in the back of the room (laugh) when they should be listening to your interesting talk on whatever, you know. You do ask yourself then why that is happening, or you should do anyway. ... And I think that it is very important that people know that the lecturer actually wants to be there and is talking to them, rather than happening to be standing there reading out these yellowed lecture notes that have been read out for the last 20 years.

A commitment to professional standards, as defined by peers: To a degree, lecturers felt it necessary and acceptable to participate in processes of monitoring and scrutiny by others. Lecturers agreed that the professional has to observe 'minimum' standards set by the profession, and has to allow scrutiny by both fellow professionals and by the recipient of the service. Student feedback was considered an integral part of these processes:

Lecturer [2]: I think the exercise is valid in at least maintaining a certain minimum, or encouraging a minimum standard of presentation to the students.

Rachel: Would you ever have a look at the scores and sit down and think about what you have been doing right or wrong?

Lecturer [13]: Oh yes, especially given that we normally teach the same unit from year to year. Oh yes, the lecturer concerned I think should take on board the criticism. ... What you have got to do is get away from the personal aspect. Staff must be given the idea that they are doing a professional job, and it's just being monitored.

As part of this, the lecturer has to acknowledge the right of the 'profession' to ensure that the professional practitioner is competent. Yet this raises the question of whom constitutes 'the profession'. Many had experienced monitoring activities from the professional body associated with their discipline. Some thought that this *disciplinary* body was the group possessed of legitimate right to define minimum standards. However others thought that the prescriptive nature of the professional body's requirements for students were too basic or 'minimal'. The call on the professional in this discipline is to strive for higher standards. These higher standards were defined in terms of the *academic* profession:

Lecturer [10]: Whereas in a compulsory course you don't have that incentive [to think of the students]. You know that students have to do it, they have to pass it, [the professional body] requires it to be taught, and really you know that there is no sort of penalty for not taking notice of the students, you just keep on teaching it the same way for ever and it doesn't matter. ... They

complain when I go through things too quickly. ... partly it's because [the professional body] requires us to get through a certain amount of basic information in the year, and if I want to add to that a critical component, then that is on top of the minimum teaching load requirements ... So while I consider what they say on the whole, I think it is good for them, a little of the critical stuff. I keep doing it, even though some people complain about it.

Professionalism assessed; the centrality of listening to students: If then, the idea of reviewing teaching practices in consultation with students is considered an essential aspect of 'professionalism', why is student feedback associated with fear, negativity and contention? The answer lies with the method lecturers used to evaluate their teaching (the SEQ), *and* the context in which this method has become the dominant approach (Silver 1992) to 'communicating' with students in contemporary UK higher education.

This issue will be returned to in Chapter 5, in respect of maintaining academic standards, and in Chapter 6, in respect of lecturers' professional development and the enhancement of students' experiences of teaching and learning. The final section in this current chapter examines what appears to concern and interest the lecturers as professional teachers, and what forms of student feedback are considered compatible with these interests. It also considers how lecturers appraise the value of the SEQ and deal with its limitations, in terms of their concerns and interests as 'professional' teachers.

3.5. Lecturers' self-identity as teachers: defining the limits of judgement

The centrality of the subject discipline: One lecturer spoke of a desire to 'evangelise' about his own discipline; he wanted to instil a level of enthusiasm amongst the students for what he felt the joy of the subject to be:

Lecturer [7]: I think it depends again on the exact context, of what you are trying to do. I want to know if I'm reaching people- If all I'm setting out to do is to relay a story, I could do really nice overheads, have a wonderful clear story and most people would be able to follow it. But, would they learn anything, other than a bunch of facts, which most of them are not going to use anyway? I mean partly what I'm doing is evangelising almost. Because it's so 'off the beaten track' what we try and do is to say, "Look this is interesting! This is different!" ... I was actually trying to get across this point that there wasn't one opinion and that there was conflicting evidence; that you think you just come to a nice neat conclusion and then you do an experiment and it throws everything up into the air again. I want to transmit some of the interest, the excitement, the difficulties, the problems, the different ways- The *point is* what's exciting about the subject is the very fact that it's difficult and it's on the edge.

His objective for his teaching was to communicate to the student the ways in which they might find the subject stimulating, and beneficial. In this context learning facts is merely an abstraction of the potential benefit that the student might gain through engagement with the subject. The student feedback that he required was to know whether students have acquired a love for the subject, and thus had been stimulated and

motivated sufficient to meet the challenges inherent to the subject. If so, then he can be assured that the student comprehends the *nature* of the subject that they are learning.

‘Just chugging away gently at the back of my mind’: The meaning of ‘teaching’ appeared closely related to the nature of the subject being taught; each lecturer’s concept of ‘teaching’ was interwoven into, and explained in terms of the value and knowledge bases of their own discipline. It seems that their professional concern for teaching, for students and for their learning was also tightly connected with concerns for the normative and cognitive domain of their subject-discipline. This perceived inter-relationship between teaching and the discipline generated problems, in terms of asking for students’ feedback. Many felt that ‘teaching’ cannot be abstracted, objectified or separated from the discipline-specific and discipline-contingent nature of the teaching and ‘experience’ that the student evaluates. Yet, it is in the discipline area that the student is unqualified to make judgements, whilst the SEQ is standardised as an evaluation of a set of generic criteria for teaching.

Macdonald (1995) argues that a traditional self-concept and publicly held idea of the purpose of a profession is to ensure that a ‘cognitive and normative domain’ is protected from ‘quackery’. A domain is both exclusive to, and the responsibility of the qualified expert: the professional’s role is to preserve its integrity. Within this, the professional expert defines the extent to which the ‘laity’ might have bearing on that domain. The expert’s powers of jurisdiction *do* involve an obligation to consultation with the ‘laity’: to ‘define the problem’ with reference to the service user. Yet they also involve the

legitimate right and *duty* to 'define the problem' in conjunction with their own expert knowledge and experience. Lecturers' solutions to the dilemma of student feedback appeared to reflect this theoretical view. Student's feedback was only *part* of the information drawn on. The process of 'defining the problem' is one in which professional 'diagnoses, infers and treats' with reference to many sources of information, and remains in a position of legitimate control. One expressed this clearly:

Lecturer [13]: I think it is our job to find out, it is our job to decide how to put things right. I think all you can expect students to do is to report on what they feel. I don't think it is their job to come up with a strategy for how to improve things, I think that's our job. All we can ask for here, all we are doing is gleaning information, not asking the students to interpret it, we are simply saying, "how do you feel?, what's your experience?"

Another reported:

Lecturer [2]: I will always look at them when I receive them. And having looked at them and looked at the comments, that will inform my general thinking. Now I wouldn't say I sat there and reflected about it, it's just chugging away gently at the back of my mind, usually slightly in isolation from when I sit down and start dealing with the course for the next time round. But by the time I do sit down and deal with the course for the next time round I'll have probably at least come up with various things that I think might be addressing issues that have been raised. Whether they end up even in the course at the end of the day is another matter. There has been a background thinking, but it is not as formal as to sit down "I'm going to reflect on my feedback".

“Bowling to student pressure”, appeared a doubtful strategy; it was unlikely to “fulfil educational goals” (Lecturer 4). “I just felt that they really weren’t in any position to be able to make a valid judgement on it. Because they really hadn’t got anything to compare it with” (Lecturer 3). Most thought that students are not necessarily adept, aware or active judges, in respect of their ability to gauge what will be good for them as learners in a particular discipline. This lecturer expresses this viewpoint, and recapitulates on Lecturer 13’s idea that professionalism is sometimes ‘opaque’:

Lecturer [7]: I mean I’m still learning about the way I learn. ... I mean if I’m still only learning that now (sigh). ... I mean I think if I get it right, what you’re asking is that if they haven’t reflected on their own learning, can they then make a reasoned judgement of the effectiveness of the teacher? And I would say no. Or rather there are certain aspects of the effectiveness of the teacher they would not make an effective judgement on.

Whilst the lecturers are responsive to students’ comments, actual changes were the outcome of a process of deliberation. In this process, students’ comments were only one part of the information used to ‘diagnose, infer and treat’. Responses to student feedback are assessed and expressed in terms of the benefits of this to students’ learning.

3.6. Deflecting the assault and insult on professionalism

The lecturer who asserted that,

Lecturer [15]: I mean I think questionnaires are super, they do a lot, they are pretty efficient. But I think they, they are a substitute aren't they. Perhaps the only one, for much better personal communication. ... I think questionnaires can do some things, rather than others. But they are not a substitute for caring teaching.

also claimed that:

Lecturer [15]: There are 2 bits to a questionnaire, and there are the basically nuts and bolts things: "Can you hear?", "Can you see?", "Are the visual materials adequate, transparent?" and so on. There are a series of common things that apply, and they've got to be useful, they've got to be, and I don't believe that they are heavily value led in most cases. ... And then there are the set of things that relate to the specific course content, and they're not quite so dangerous. And then at the end we've got all the bits like, "Have you any other comments?", or the stuff which is much more reflective. And that is a difficult area, because there there's lots of difficulties of interpretation.

Whilst he believed the questionnaire provides, "a neat and easy way of summarising someone's teaching, which is very difficult to summarise in any other way", he also maintained that what is measured is only a basic component of teaching. Furthermore, he advances a method of student feedback that - especially when standardised - others feel produces

information that is irrelevant, meaningless and lacking in value in terms of their interests. Finally he - like they - found both method and information to be of low value as a form of 'care', and 'communication'. The SEQ is a problem because:

Lecturer [2]: I actually think in some ways although the responses told me they were having problems with the course, in the end they didn't actually tell me the information I needed to know. ... I've got comments now about the clarity of presentation and things, that I am pretty certain come from doing just one or two just basic changes, which actually I did pick up on by reading something completely different.

That is, for the subject expert and professional teacher, the SEQ does not provide information that is valuable. The lecturers' experiences suggest that the criteria on the SEQ do not reflect the individual lecturer's own definitions of 'good teaching'; rather they focus on aspects that are irrelevant, or superficial. Similarly, the quality and type of information does not reveal, or allow investigation into, the reasons for any perceived problems. The information is thus of only minimal value and interest, it enables the lecturer only partial insight into a small part of their practice.

It is interesting that Lecturer 15 both supports, and devalues the questionnaire. It is possible to draw two conclusion from this. First, the lecturer describes a compromise: he is obliged to conduct an official 'formal' review of his teaching, for the hands of managers and the external assessors. This review must adhere to criteria that enforce a documented, universally applied and standardised format, and must be 'efficient' in

terms of time and administrative resources. Whether or not the activity is valid and valuable, it is sufficient to fulfil these demands and criteria.

A second conclusion might be that because student feedback questions the lecturer's competence and practice as a professional, student feedback represents assault and insult. Yet when criteria used focus on the least contentious aspects of the lecturer's practice - those that he describe focus on technical and material aspects of the teaching environment - criticism of the lecturer's professionalism and professionalism is deflected, depersonalised, and superficial. Thus student feedback in this form is easily dismissed and devalued. Furthermore to the extent that the lecturer *does* feel justifiably vulnerable, in the sense that his or her competence *is* questioned, a form of feedback that focuses on 'trivial' aspects of professionalism is safe: superficiality acts as a defence against the threat presented by student feedback. The lecturer's professionalism is not called in to question, because what is judged is not valued. What is judged does not represent what lies at the root of professionalism in teaching in higher education for these lecturers.

Conclusion: Professionalism is defined in terms of values: a concern for the subject-discipline, for the student, and for teaching that will progress the students' development as a learner in that subject-discipline. This concern is expressed as listening to students, and as attempts to gain high quality and useful data from students. Nevertheless, operating a 'trivial' form of student feedback is useful: it reduces the risk of public exposure to, and professional ridicule by those whoops opinions count. At the same time the SEQ results assume the status of high value documents and data because they

represent the 'formal' attention to teaching demanded by managers and external assessors.

3.7 Conclusion

Lecturers claim high levels of 'responsible autonomy', and high levels of both work and ethical commitment to the students, to students' learning and to the students' higher education experience. Student feedback is considered acceptable, reasonable and even essential to the academic's teaching in these respects. However this holds only on condition that the academic, as professional remains in control of 'defining the problem' of teaching and learning. This implies a form of student feedback that both expresses and achieves high quality concern for students, is focused on subject discipline and individual interests, and enables professional development in line with their own, and with peer-determined standards.

The suspicion is that, in contemporary higher education, student feedback implies that the student has greater and wider powers and rights to 'define' the form and content of teaching and a course. In these terms, student feedback is rejected, considered contentious, or lamented as injurious to students' academic development. This derision for student feedback originates, paradoxically, in concern for students. It exists simultaneously with beliefs that engagement and discussion with students are valuable and necessary because student feedback is part of a professional consultation with the student. In principle, information that lecturers' glean from communication with

students is valued, and has the potential to inform the deliberative process during which the professional 'defines the problem' of teaching and learning. Resistance, to forms and results of student feedback that have little relevance for the lecturer is focused on the SEQ and expressed in terms of professional values, beliefs and interests.

Students differentiate between the terms 'lecturer' and 'teacher'; for students these epithets imply very different sets of attitudes, interests and competencies. Students' experience of the process and methods of student feedback reflects and informs their perceptions that the 'lecturer' is a distant expert, more interested in research than teaching, and seldom concerned for students or their learning.

Yet four themes, that run conjointly with their characterisations of the lecturer, ameliorate this somewhat negative, perhaps also stereotypical picture. First, students' expectations of the lecturer are informed by, and relative to their ideas about their own role as students. Second, students' ideas of what would be a 'good teacher' cohere with the lecturers' own goals, self-expectations and standards in their teaching. Third, what motivates students to give concerned and detailed feedback is behaviour, on the part of the lecturer, that makes the lecturer appear 'teacher-like'. Fourth, students suggest that the SEQ - the most commonly experienced method of student feedback - does not enable the student to engage in a teaching relationship with the lecturer; rather it is a factor in their experiences of alienation within the institution and alienation from their lecturers.

In this context, the SEQ form of student feedback is an object of frustration for both students and lecturers. It also generates a contradiction: it is assumed to 'represent' concern for students, but conflicts with lecturers' own ideas of professionalism and professionalism in teaching. At the same time, the SEQ is a non-interactive method, and concentrates on aspects of teaching and learning such as 'presentation'; both factors constitute what students define as lecturing, rather than teaching. Both these factors render the experience of the SEQ similar to that of the experience of the 'lecturer', rather than the 'teacher'. The meaning of professionalism in teaching in higher education is grounded in, and realised through value-based commitments, concerns, and processes. It is not expressed, evidenced or promoted through superficial analyses of the "nuts and bolts" of classroom performances. Paradoxically, the latter confirm a more traditional picture of the lecturer as "video" or "robot" who has little concern for students and their teaching.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER FOUR

A means to empower the customer

Higher Quality and Choice: The Charter for Higher Education

This Charter explains the standards of service that students, employers and the general public can expect from universities ... Customers of universities and colleges also have responsibilities and the Charter reminds you of some of them. But the focus is on the meeting of **your** legitimate needs. If you are not satisfied with the service you receive, the Charter explains what you can do to get it put right. ... You should receive a high standard of teaching and research supervision. This includes effective management of your learning by teaching and other staff. You should also be given the opportunity to register your views (DfE 1993:2,12; emphasis in the original).

... applicants, students, employers, parents, taxpayers, the government and the academic community itself, all have a proper concern to know that the quality and standards of the UK's higher education are being consciously addressed, protected and improved. Accountability is rendered by audit through the disclosure of institutional quality assurance practices (HEQC 1994b:vi).

Communication and student charters. ... In responding to national charters, the academic institution will find it helpful to ... put in place relevant policies and procedures to meet the expectations ... for: ... allowing students to register their views. ...

Complaints and grievances. ... Many quality control systems set particular store by complaints as an important source of feedback (HEQC 1996a:44-46).

Introduction

This chapter claims that student feedback is instrumental to the intention to redefine the student as ‘customer’ of higher education.

In this respect, student feedback plays a role in a ‘politics of representation’ (Clarke and Newman 1997:107-122). The customer has the right to both ‘voice’ and ‘choice’; these enable the customer to effect forces for change (du Gay and Salaman 1992, Pollitt 1993). Whether students see themselves as ‘customers’, and whether student feedback is effective in enabling the student’s right to ‘voice’ and ‘choice’, are essential questions, and yet remain unexamined in policy or practice. This chapter investigates the relationships between students’ perceptions of their role, identity, their ideas of the limits of their ‘rights’, their ideas of effective and legitimate ‘voice’, and their approaches to and assessments of student feedback.

First I examine the centrality of the ‘customer’ⁱ to the government’s strategies for the reform of higher education. The ‘politics of representation’ is an attempt to empower the student, as ‘customer’. The assumption is that, subject to *consumer* power, the

academic community's control over service provision is diminished. The 'politics of representation' also contains a contesting set of arguments; these attempt to extend the consumerist framework in terms of a definition of the service-user as '*empowered citizen*'. In these terms, the student is seen to possess *democratic* rights to greater levels of on-going participation in determining the nature and provision of higher education 'services'. The democratic right to participation, and the student's status are grounded on formal and social recognition of their rights as members of the institution, rather than contingent on a relative and contestable ideological force, or their relative significance to the institution by way of varying powers of purchase. The issues of democracy and empowerment are considered in conclusion to this chapter in respect of students' ideas of their role, identity and status within the university.

Second, I examine students' perceptions of the demands and implications of giving student feedback. I use these to discuss how well students' attitudes and approaches to student feedback fit with a hypothetical set of assumptions about the role and rights of the 'customer'.

Third, I make an assessment of students' perceptions of their role and identity. I claim that students' sense of self is fragmented and grounded on feelings of vulnerability. I suggest that students experience multiple roles, and perceive themselves to be isolated and subject to sanction. Implicit to their perceptions is the role of the 'good student'. I contrast students' ideas of the 'good student' with those of lecturers. I highlight how the SEQ fails to enable the student to perform against either their own, or the lecturers' assessments of the 'good student'. Yet, in the light of students' views on their own

position - views that are informed by and reflected in their experience of student feedback - it would seem that *any* form of assertion is difficult.

It is possible to infer students' ideas, of the limits and conditions of legitimate empowerment, from their approaches to student feedback and ideas of self. However these ideas and approaches are problematic: they imply self-oppression. I suggest that although students *desire* greater empowerment, they are frustrated by their own fears of penalty and sanction. This fear is perhaps inevitable given that the student's experience of higher education is tightly bound to assessment and grading. However, as this chapter demonstrates, this fear is also tightly bound to their relations with, and perceptions of lecturers. These perceptions and relations are not obviated, or alleviated by the SEQ. Students need a medium through which they can assert their views and, simultaneously, form relationships with lecturers that are based on on-going, and mutually progressed, reassessments of 'who' the other is, and how the other sees them.

4.1. 'The politics of representation'

The imperatives that come with 'identity': Bourdieu argues that when roles and identities are formally defined and instituted, the subject experiences a set of imperatives for action; investiture acts as a constraint through the operation of socially recognised and reproduced dynamics:

To institute ... is to sanction and sanctify a particular state of things, an established order ... a difference ...; it consists of making it exist as a social difference, known and recognised as such by the agent invested and everyone else. ... The process of investiture ... transforms the person consecrated: first because it transforms the representations others have of him and above all the behaviour they adopt towards him ...; and second because it simultaneously transforms the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behaviour he feels obliged to adopt to conform to that representation (Bourdieu 1991:119; my emphasis).

‘The student’; definitions and contest: The definition and re-definition of the student’s role and identity is a contested and contentious issue. In conclusion to a debate entitled The Role of Students in Quality Assurance, Harold Silver ‘noted that throughout the proceedings the vocabulary used by speakers and delegates to describe students and their role in quality assurance had varied between customers and consumers through to participants and partners’ (QSC 1995:?). Partington et. al. (1993:1) define the student as ‘stake-holder’. Their interpretation of the ‘statutory obligation’ of student feedback is that the importance of the student’s role in quality assurance is ‘raised’, and the position of the ‘stake-holder’ is ‘now significantly more influential’ (p.8). Yet their interpretation, that student feedback is an expression of institutional concern for ‘quality’, also entails an understanding that this is ‘particularly true if: education is conceived as a service and the student as the consumer’ (p.84). In these terms, student feedback is also an expression of ‘an institutional culture which values inputs from students and sees them as part of a continuous process of improvement aimed at

consumer satisfaction' (p.85). Thus whilst they prefer the term 'stakeholder', the term is contextualised by, and thus defined in terms of a market ideology:

the previously untouchable, elitist, ivory towers of learning have been transformed into 'trading estates', ... the stakeholders in the trade they ply have become all important arbiters of their effectiveness and efficiency. In short, it is now widely acknowledged that students, as consumers and stake-holders, have a powerful and significant new role to play (p.1).

Silver and Silver (1997) describe historical, public, political and academic 'images' of the role and identity of the student. They argue that both media, political and academic discourses, and research and policy outcomes, have shaped the concept of what it *means* to be a student. The argument is complex; it seems that over time, images of the student have been both homogeneous, stereotypical and stable, and *also* fragmentary, contested and in flux. They define the rise of the 'student-customer' as a reflection of the discursive imperatives of the Charter for Higher Education (DfE 1993), and of the marketisation of the UK higher education system:

As British public higher education has been driven towards the market the dominant imagery has also become that of the consumer, customer and purchaser. ... [T]he British interest in the student-as-consumer ... resulted essentially from government financing policy. ... Student judgements about the quality of their courses had ... become important to their parent institutions. 'Student feedback' related to concerns other than those of gratifying the consumer, though the latter played an

Defining the student; stakes and interests: The struggle to 'represent' the 'student-as-customer' concerns political, management and professional interests. Clarke and Newman (1997:110) argue that whilst at a political level, the Citizens' Charter movement 'opened up state organisations to greater scrutiny and control, and enabled ... the power to enforce priorities through the operation of performance targets and league tables', any particular Charter *also* enables specific management interests.

At both political and management levels, attempts to represent the service-user as 'customer' involve, and necessitate, articulation of the customer's needs. The construct 'customer' is defined, and asserted, by reference to these needs. Of significance to these attempts to redefine both 'users' and their 'needs' is the challenge it presents to those professions and professionals that have always claimed to be 'client' centred. New definitions exert control over the professional providers of the particular service by creating new specifications and directions for their work. Simultaneously, new definitions call into question the professional's right to 'define the problem' of appropriate service provision. This is the right that is central to professional authority, and underpins the exercise of professional judgement (Clarke and Newman 1997:110, 116). The student identity, their rights and status in relation to the professional and their needs are subject for contest between professionals and managers. At issue are the following questions:

- who the student is;
- what needs they are judged to have;
- by whom and against which criteria judgement of 'need' is made; and, by implication, how, are their views collected and interpreted;
- by whom; and,
- against which criteria.

From the managerial perspective,

knowledge of the customer has come to be more highly valued than bureau-professional knowledge of the client, not least because the technologies of customer research generate what appear to be reliable and extensive quantitative data about preferences, expectations and levels of satisfaction. Such data form a sharp contrast with the informal and qualitative knowledges of the client which is typically the basis of professional claims (Clarke and Newman 1997:117).

From a managerial perspective, data concerning the needs and satisfactions of the student are gathered in quantitative form as and armory of 'scientifically' produced data. The use of the SEQ is favoured as means of researching the needs of the 'student-customer' for reason of the status of this methodological paradigm relative to the informal, qualitative means used by professionals.

Empowered students: Within a context that witnesses the empowerment of managers

through a government policy premised on a market ideology, student feedback might be seen as both symbol and agent of political, managerial and market forces. However, in higher education, 'at one end of a spectrum it [is] possible to see feedback as simply management data, and at the other end to see responses to courses and level of satisfaction as part of the process of student empowerment' - a process that might be explained in terms that extend beyond consumer-rights and transactions (Silver and Silver 1997:166). This latter interpretation of the student's role and identity mirrors arguments that contest a consumerist interpretation of the UK citizen's relationship to public service providers (Clarke and Newman 1997:121). In contrast to a consumerist interpretation, the concept of student empowerment might be used to identify what the student is entitled to, and what the student's purposes are, as *citizen*, or *member of a community*. As 'citizen' of a university, the student is involved in a complex of internal relations and relationships, and in *active* and *on-going processes* of influence and participation:

What the student has acquired ... is the right to influence, to propose, to oppose, to make effective representations, to promote change, to encounter frameworks and opportunities within which to create an education (Silver and Silver 1997:168; my emphasis).

The thus-empowered student takes responsibility for, and is active in both the construction of the community and in the creation of their own education within that community. The role and identity of the student empowered as 'citizen' contrasts strongly with that of a student who possesses a relationship to the institution that is

constructed through relative powers of purchase and expressed as passive consumption of a product purchased as an 'outsider'.

The student and the University: Thus far, the various definitions of the role and identity of the student I have given have been articulated and contested by those *other* than the student him or herself. Yet the imperatives consequent on each definition of the student *are* experienced by lecturers as forces exerted *by the individual students themselves*. The student is regarded as responsible for dispositions and demands that reflect roles and identities defined by others:

Lecturer [4]: I could ... say that they're consumers and they're paying, so if that's what they want then that's what we ought to give them.

Rachel: Consumers?

Lecturer [4]: Yes, we're split more and more. And if that's the product they want, well it doesn't matter if it's not educationally good, if that's what they want and they're prepared to pay for it we should give it to them.

Lecturer [3]: It is a marketing exercise. They are our customers. You have to find out whether they're happy or not, whether they like what we give them, what they get. ... I suppose you have to take a sledge hammer to get things moving, don't you. And, appeals and all this business- I mean I think a lot of academic staff feel quite threatened at the moment, because they feel that the students have all the power.

Lecturer 3 immediately adds the rejoinder, "Well perhaps [the staff] only perceive the students have the power *because* we've never allowed them to say what they wanted, in the past". Both she, and this next lecturer, infer a traditional concept of the student's role and identity within the University.

Rachel: Do you think that students feel they have power with that piece of paper?

Lecturer [10]: Yes probably power. They probably get a feeling of power sometimes. Perhaps also because they are not given very many opportunities to hit back. And a lot of them are very intimidated in tutorials and they feel as though they can't say anything. And suddenly they are given the opportunity to do something anonymously and in a group, and they get a feeling of power, and sometimes I think it does go to their heads.

Student feedback represents perceived change in the relation between lecturer and student. This change may be illusory, but it is also contested. As an instrument of change, student feedback is similarly contested.

Pilkington and Cawkwell (1994) explain how the student role and identity is defined and regulated by the structures and culture of the University. They argue that the University has 'quasi judicial powers' over students; these powers have historical, cultural and legal foundations. The derivation and object of these powers is the stability of traditional ethics, ethos, and discipline. Legal and cultural authority is manifest in symbols, and is effected through the University's procedures for 'policing, disciplining and punishing their students'. A student has multiple 'contractual relations' within the University. These are material - with service providers - and implicit to various temporal or cultural

features of life in the University. These various 'contractual relations' are expressed as a set of memberships, rights, duties, expectations and obligations (p.82-83), and inform the student of their different roles, identities and status in each respect.

From this perspective therefore, student feedback might be viewed as an *inversion* of the traditional flow of messages to the student. *Traditionally*, 'the academy not only defines what knowledge is, but also defines and regulates what a *student* is' (Morley 1997:237, emphasis in the original).

Conclusion: On the one hand, student feedback is both symbol and agent of a struggle to redefine the student as 'customer'. On the other, I have suggested that the University also has powers to determine the role and identity of the student. Moreover, I have argued that the student is less subject than object of change; negative and positive assertions about the imperatives and consequences of the 'student-customer' are tools in the 'politics of representation' that takes place between professionals, management and government. The same time, the student is positioned in a role scripted by others, and yet is viewed as the source of both new imperatives and a contentious realignment of roles and relative powers.

In this context, and returning to Bourdieu, the 'representations others have' of the contemporary student constitute a conflicting set of imperatives for the behaviour the student will 'feel obliged to adopt'. Given these tensions it is worth examining how students perceive and experience student feedback, and how their impressions of student

feedback relate to their own interpretations of their role and identity.

4.2. The behaviour students feel ‘obliged to adopt’ in the university: student feedback and the ‘student customer’

In this section I make the assumption that student feedback is intended as something akin to a customer feedback and complaints mechanism. This interpretation of student feedback implies a hypothetical concept of the ‘customer’; I define the assumptions that underpin this concept below. Students’ experiences of student feedback are discussed in terms of these assumptions: this is the behaviour students are ‘obliged to adopt’ as ‘customers’. Their reactions and coping strategies imply a picture of how they see themselves.

A hypothetical concept of the ‘customer’: Within a market ideology, the customer is assumed ‘sovereign’ (c.f. du Gay and Salaman 1992). The customer incurs no penalty for airing their views on a product: customers’ opinions are sought and used by the producer to ‘perfect’ the product for mutual benefit (Pollitt 1988). In this way, the customer exerts high levels of control. In a positive sense, the ‘sovereign customer’ is assumed knowledgeable, authoritative, and righteous. In a pejorative sense, the concept ‘customer’ has overtones of individualistic self-interest and a lack of accountability to the producer, or for the demands and consequences of the production process.

I now use the dimensions of this hypothetical concept to assess the student's views. I introduce each part of the analysis by explaining how the above dimensions translate into the context of higher education.

4.2.1. Knowledgeable

This idea assumes that the 'student-customer' has a level of expertise in the subject, a clear idea of the best ways to teach that subject, and also an explicit understanding of how their progress in learning relates to the way in which it is taught.

Expertise: Many students expressed the view that, relative to the lecturer, they had a low level of subject-expertise. They described how their understanding of the subject, and their awareness of the nature and demands of that subject grew over the time at university. In their view, the student's purpose in higher education is to learn from those who know more; the student regards the lecturer as legitimate judge and authority on the assumption of this greater expertise.

Student [7]: People hate [a particular lecturer], but she's a bloody good lecturer, a bloody good lecturer. She's clued in, she's prepared and she gets you there. And people hate her guts, but she's done everything. It's like you go in there and you think, "For God's sake is there nothing you haven't done?" ...

[Later, talking about co-presenting with a lecturer]

Student [7]: I felt part of the time that I was taking over what was going on because she wasn't

reacting to all these questions. And I was kind of like, "Well how many thousands do you get paid, and I'm just a bloody student!".

Rachel: Well maybe you knew more than she did about it.

Student [7]: No I don't know more than the lecturer ... she knows far more than I do.

Because the lecturer is an authoritative subject expert, giving student feedback becomes an act of assertion that requires great confidence. This next student feels that his views are not legitimate if only representative of a singular voice. His individual 'knowledge' has no authority. He suggests that if he justifies his views in terms of the discipline, the lecturer will be more likely to credit his feedback. He has to research the subject *more* widely, and to explain his views in person. He feels he has to earn 'voice' through reasoning; he has to express himself in terms of a polite, tentative request.

Student [2]: I sat in lectures of 40-50 people, 60 maybe, and I just didn't feel that just one person would make- Would go along to that lecturer who'd had probably 30 years' experience and say, "Well I think your course is really crap!". I just didn't feel that I had the confidence to do that, unless there were other people who felt the same way. And nobody else seemed to feel the same way about the course. ... Or they haven't had experiences of better courses than that. Whether all the courses in our department are the same I don't know.

Rachel: So, how did you express your views?

Student [2]: I just used my sort of further reading about that particular topic area for that seminar, and said well maybe, "I was a bit disappointed we didn't concentrate on this, and I was just wondering whether that might be taken on in future years".

Teaching: Students saw themselves as beginners in a process of self-development; higher education was not simply an extension of school, it is a different environment. As with Student 2 (above) other students often acknowledged that it was difficult for them to draw judgements on the lecturer's teaching because they had never experienced university level education, or a particular course before; students have little to draw on in order to make comparisons. Because the student recognises that they have no explicit, holistic or longitudinal knowledge about *what* standards are typical or accepted as satisfactory, it is difficult to give feedback.

Learning and Teaching: Whilst students were able to describe their own ideas of learning (see below) they felt that the relationship between learning and teaching is seemingly intangible and indeterminate. They thus found it difficult to establish clear ideas about the impact of the teaching on their own progress. This next student appears to have begun to question the learning and teaching relationship; however, he has not come to any definite conclusions. Moreover, having begun to think and question, it becomes *more* difficult for him to understand and complete the questionnaire: the SEQ requires that students consider aspects of teaching as if the relationship of these to learning were simple, whereas the student is undergoing a process of recognising that there is no such clarity:

Student [1]: I think um you *might* just go through [the evaluation form] saying "OK, OK, good, bad" - they might be cleverly worded and you *might* respond "Oh yes, *this*", straight away. But when you think - Well I certainly think about actually the questions. You actually think , "Did I

learn more from one lecturer than another? Is that because I was more interested in the subject or was it that did I have no interest in either subject? Did the lecturer help in my enjoyment of the subject?". I definitely think in looking back that you can see that you have learnt the subject better because of the way it was presented in class. It might not be- It might be because of the subject matter, I don't know. I mean there are going to be subjects that are deadly boring, whoever lectures them. But [when] he's making it a bit more fun, a bit more real it is going to be more interesting, and then maybe it will help your understanding and learning of the subject.

In order to achieve a level of clarity about the relationship between teaching and learning the students felt that they needed to think, deliberate, and discuss their views and understandings.

Student feedback: Given these perspectives, a SEQ method of student feedback does not help the student. First, students needed to talk to the lecturer. They felt that in a discussion, they might be able to explore and explain their views about a lecturer's teaching. A simple numerical ranking is categorical. Students felt that by giving a categorical judgement they were *not* expressing to the lecturer that they held only tentative, cautious views about teaching, learning and the subject:

Student [3]: You are just making a specific judgement on these people by circling *a number* and it's a bit too, it's a bit too divorced from anything else, because you don't sort of write down, justify why you've circled that number so much really. ... It's not quite so black and white like that.

Rachel: How do you decide how you rate something on a 1 to 5 scale? How do you decide what a '3' is?

Student [6]: Sometimes it's difficult because it depends on what wording they've used for the '5' or the '1'. They might have chosen a word that doesn't quite fit into giving it a '3' on that word.
But- I can't really think of two words, but say, "Good", and "Acceptable", in the fact that some things are acceptable but they are not brilliant. Or some things you have learnt well, but they've not been brilliant.

Second, students felt that they needed to qualify, evidence and justify their views. This, they felt, would be compatible with their understandings of conventional processes of argument in higher education, and would bestow on their comments greater levels of legitimacy and credence. This need is more significant when taken together with their perception that the lecturer might question the student's expertise and experience in both the subject-discipline and in teaching in higher education. The students felt that if the lecturer takes the view that the student has questionable status as expert, then the lecturer will question the student's status as critic, and hence doubt the validity of students' views. The task set for the student becomes one of rectifying the situation by explaining and substantiating an argument, and to pursuing this in terms of the lecturer's concerns with the subject-discipline.

Third, students cast their own doubts on the value and validity of their own views. They saw themselves as one individual amongst many, and regarded the inevitable subjectivity of their views as a problem. In these respects, they thought that their views had only relative value and status: their views were not automatically justified or

sovereign, and would differ from those of other students:

Student [3]: the numbers are very hard to sort of say, “Well this is a 3, or a 5”. ... It’s just hard to be - It’s a very subjective thing isn’t it. For one person it’s a 3, for one person it’s a 4, it just depends how they are feeling on the day.

Thus even if an individual student feels confident about their own ideas, the student will not consider their ideas to be more expert, or superior to those of other students: “I didn’t necessarily agree with all that was being said, but you obviously have to come to a general consensus anyway” (Student 4). Students undermine the authority of their own views, and yet are not helped to rectify what they see as problematic because the means of doing this are unavailable to them.

4.2.2 Righteous

The level of a customer’s satisfaction with a product is determined as a measure of that product. Thus lack of satisfaction is a reflection of fault in the product. Customers are not responsible for their own lack of satisfaction; similarly their views are always valid, rather than inaccurate. The benefits that accrue to a customer from the purchased product are assumed to derive from the product itself: the customer is passive. From this perspective, the ‘student-customer’ is not to blame for failures in learning. If the ‘student-customer’ dislikes a process of learning or a course, this reaction is regarded as negative. For all these reasons the ‘student-customer’ is not only always right, but is in

a position to feel righteous.

This depiction contrasts markedly with the student's perceptions of responsibility, fault, and blame in respect of the processes and outcomes of learning.

Fault: I asked students to describe whether, and how, they had addressed situations that they had found difficult or not optimal. It was significant that students often spoke of resolving *their own* problems with lecturers. In this respect, the student *internalises* criticism: the student perceives failures and problems to be a measure of their own ability as learners and of their own capacity to cope. Student feedback becomes an idea of seeking assistance from the lecturer about a problem. This first student suggests that if a student feels uncomfortable with a lecturer, the student will feel that addressing their problems - revealing weakness - is a risk. The second student's friend becomes "famous" because he acted unconventionally: the student implies that a lecturer would not generally see themselves as, so that it is important not to behave as if this might be taken for granted. An alternative interpretation of his viewpoint is that it is important that the student does not mark him or herself out to a lecturer as a 'problem' student:

Student [2]: The personal tutor system in my department doesn't work. ... The idea of getting 8 or 10 students, who get to know one lecturer really well and take all their problems to him or her, sounds wonderful. But when the lecturer is not especially committed to it, it breaks down. ... if you haven't got that relationship with the personal tutor that you are supposed to have that relationship with, then certainly the feedback is not going to get through. You take it to the

Staff/Student Liaison Committee, but ... somebody is down as saying, "Well I think that we should have tea and coffee in seminars". Well that's really going to make people feel better if they are having problems with their lecturers, and the quality of their teaching.

Student [1]: I've never- I haven't ever been to see a lecturer about my problems but one of the guys I lived with last year became quite famous as um- ... One of my tutors said, "Oh yes, I've met your friend [name]". And it seems that all the lecturers know him.

The problem of self-revelation is obviated in a context where the student and lecturer have established a level of familiarity:

Student [3]: I mean I, if I ever did feel unhappy about something I would go and see them about it. And I often went to see people and had discussions about things.

Rachel: Did you ever go and see anyone in [Subject Y, which you had difficulties in]?

Student [3]: Not really, I didn't feel- Because I didn't feel that I really knew the people in that department as well as in [Subject X] department. I rarely went to see them about anything ... I didn't feel quite as if I could go and talk to them about things because I just didn't really know them as well, because I'd spent very little time in the department. Whereas here you sort of come across them, like doing the theatre play production and things. You meet lecturers much more and it's easier to talk to them.

Passivity and responsibility: That students internalised, and felt responsible for, their own problems relates to the students' understandings of the demands of learning in

higher education. They thought lecturers might helpfully facilitate the process of learning - the situation in which the lecturer translates as 'good teacher':

Student [1]: But um generally I'm happy with the way it is. And I mean- Um, I think um people perhaps would learn more if we had lecturers who could teach rather than um- Just copy out notes. I don't know.

Student 1 has construed, from his experiences, that learning in higher education is typically a passive process: the lecturer gives the student information to go away and learn. Yet he would like the lecturer to facilitate a process that enables greater levels of student participation and activity. Students interpreted 'facilitation' as a concept that implies interaction between the student and the lecturer and the opportunity to engage actively with the subject matter:

Student [7]: I keep myself going by ... talking to people. But more of my learning has been to do with being interactive. It's being interactive with tutors and testing out what we've been told.

There *are* parts where you need information, where you have to take on board information, you have to learn verbatim. ... But the learning is how you deal with that information, how you use that information. And learning is using that and it becoming a difference in your life.

Students' desire for greater levels of interaction within the classroom has to be considered in conjunction with the contrasting perception that they also need to be independent, and to demonstrate this independence to the lecturer. Whether the learning experience in the classroom is active or passive, the students felt it was their own role

and duty to learn, understand and use the information that they were given, or the information that they found.

Whilst students held few clear opinions on the relationship between teaching and learning, when prompted, each student could articulate a hesitant picture of what learning meant to, and involved for, them. For example:

Rachel: What's learning about ?

Student [6]: Being able to clarify what- That's not the right word. Being able to make sense of what, of what you are hearing. ... I don't know exactly what learning means but- To me it's, it's- It's '*going inside*'. Um. Literally, "I'm taking it in and I know what it means and it makes sense and I could use it, and I could get up and say, "This is this because this, because that", and I would feel happy with it. That's probably if I'd *learnt* it actually. Because *learning* is the process of getting to that point, which you don't always get to, but I suppose you strive to understand it all. ... I know that I reflect on my learning. I still don't know how I do it best, or how exactly I do it, but I know that I get frustrated by not being able to do it, or frustrated by wasting time, wasting efforts. And it not going in. And at other times being able to concentrate and getting focused on increasing um your concentration levels, being able to take in more than you can. But you do look back on how you could do it. ... If I get interested in a subject then I can sit there with books and stuff and I can- ... teach myself and learn. If I am interested and I want to sit down and I want to learn- Then you do get into it and you do learn.

Whilst she sees learning as a process that she pursues herself, and that leads to a growth in self-confidence, she still regards the lecturer's role as important. Whilst the outcome

of the process is the student's own responsibility, the lecturer plays a part in guiding/facilitating that process:

Student [6]: But getting to that point in time I don't think you can do on your own. I think that there is a lot of stuff that you need to know, that maybe you think that you would know as much but you wouldn't have such an all round knowledge. You'd only know bits here and there, and you wouldn't be able to connect it so well.

There is sufficient evidence in the extracts I give in this section to suggest that students have *some* insight into their own perceptions of learning; the allegation that students' responses to student feedback demonstrate that students do not have such a reflective capacity requires examination. One conclusion might be that students' responses are a product of the method of student feedback, rather than a reflection of the student's capability; this latter argument is identified by the following *lecturer*:

Rachel: Do you think that students are capable of reflecting on their own learning?

Lecturer [2]: I think they can probably reflect back easily on what the- The sort of enjoyment, non-enjoyment type aspect fairly easily. I think it is more difficult to reflect back, particularly quite so close to the event, on the educational value, unless it's at the extreme level of "I didn't understand a bloody word". Err, I wouldn't want to say they can't, but I just get the feeling that that is rather more difficult and actually the way the questionnaires tend to get filled out almost discourages in-depth reflection.

Moreover, a different, discursive or qualitative, method might enable the student to

make further sense of their own views, at the same time as their reasoning becomes less opaque to the lecturer and might be developed by the lecturer.

Dislikes: Students also accepted that learning in higher education was *supposed* to be difficult and challenging. As discussed in Chapter 3, part of what *is* difficult and challenging is the need to take responsibility for learning. Students were quick to make it clear that they did not necessarily interpret difficulty, or hard work as a negative:

Rachel: What are they evaluating on these forms?

Student [5]: Your satisfaction with the course, your satisfaction with the lecturers, and your satisfaction with the like course content. Whether you thought the practical parts of the course were beneficial enough. Whether you thought the essay thing- "Was it too much work?", "Was it too little work?". I'm not saying it's too much work, and I'm not saying that you can't do it, but they could improve.

In these terms the extent to which a student is *satisfied* with a course is not a reflection of absolute levels of difficulty or hard work. The student's satisfaction derives from his ability to cope with and overcome these challenges; what "they could improve" is, presumably, what is "beneficial" to his ability to cope. Students characterise themselves as active in, and responsible for the process of learning. Their levels of satisfaction are self-determined: they are a measure of achievement relative to the standards the students have set for themselves.

Student Feedback: In respect of the views offered here, student feedback that is focused on the lecturer is redundant, if not also a confusion. To the extent that the lecturer's activity in the classroom *is* important to students, student feedback might helpfully focus on the ways in which the lecturer *facilitated* learning. Facilitation is a process of inter-personal exchange and exploration. On the SEQ however, questions typically concern other issues, such as the lecturer's presentation or the course structure.

4.2.3 Authoritative

The 'student-customer' might be assumed authoritative on grounds other than expertise. The 'student-customer' possesses the right to speak out, and this opinion is also valued. There is no risk that the 'student-customer' will be penalised for voicing their opinion; rather the reverse is true: the 'student-customer' will be thanked for assistance with 'product' development.

Right to speak out: Student feedback is, by definition, a form of criticism: criticism calls current conventions into question. Student feedback represents an institutional *willingness* to listen, and is a symbol of institutional *responsiveness*. Yet, students characterise the university as inert and resistant to change. The student is positioned such that s/he should feel grateful for the 'permission' to speak out:

Student [7]: It's like knowing, trying to suss how much permission you have. ... think that it's still the 'do and say the right thing'. There's an expectation of you to get on with it and not rock the boat too much.

Students interpreted student feedback as a mandatory procedure imposed on lecturers by others. This interpretation enables students to reason that the lecturer will attempt to resist and subvert the activity. This reasoning provided the students with some explanation for a given lecturer's apparent unwillingness to engage in, or respond to student feedback. Students felt that a practice only *needs* to be imposed and made mandatory when there is no widespread cultural support for the activity. That student feedback is mandatory signifies that student feedback is unwanted and unwelcome. This student suggests that there is no genuine willingness to listen to students, and asserts his idea of what would happen if there were such a culture:

Rachel: Why were they doing it in the first place, do you think?

Student [5]: Probably because they have to - I think they have to give them out, by, by obviously this Dean's ruling that you have to give one of these things out afterwards. Now fairly I think that's a very very good idea. What I think would be a better idea is in the last lecture, the lecturer says, "Right this is you last lecture in this course, I'm handing these things out. If you have any criticism or complements that you would like to write on here, if you would like me to get back in touch with you about it, if you would like to come and see me about it or just talk about it, we'll do it". None of them do that. They just hand you this piece of paper; they don't even tell you what it's for.

Students' descriptions of their experiences also suggest that there is another dynamic to

their perceptions that lecturers and the higher education culture are unresponsive. This involves the invisibility of the process and the lecturer's perceived willingness to engage with students. Student feedback is experienced as routine bureaucracy that is administered by others. This means that the process of analysis of student feedback data is invisible to the student. Because students are not party to the analysis process, they have no way of knowing what the lecturer's reaction and response has been. Students expressed their uncertainty in the form of distrust. The students did not trust the process, and did not trust that the process was fully engaged with. This level of distrust fuelled suspicions and doubts concerning the lecturer's motives and attitudes. Students asserted that responsiveness is contingent on the individual lecturer's willingness to engage with students.

Student [6]: Usually the ones that have more participation are the people who are doing it right.

Unfortunately the people who aren't, don't and therefore don't get much better and therefore from year to year the courses aren't good, or don't get any better anyway.

Lack of penalty: Many students felt cautious about student feedback because they felt that criticism would be unwelcome, unwanted or risky. They felt that there were constraints on what it was legitimate for a student to criticise, and also constraints on how criticism should be put. Furthermore, students felt the need to fit into the institutional environment and learn the meaning and limits of roles and rules. If the student did not conform to norms and conventions, the student would be subject to sanction.

Student feedback is an act of self-exposure. A subjective judgement is an expression of, and might be read as, a statement of the student's values and preferences. It might also be read as a statement about the student's understanding of what learning in higher education demands. The student reveals their values, understandings and preferences to the lecturer; these are then exposed to potential scrutiny and judgement. Considered from this perspective, the student will tailor their views in order to hide their weaknesses, or in relation to their ideas of what will please or impress the lecturer.

Student [4]: You didn't want to stand up and go, "Well I thought it was a bit too hard" (laugh), because you would look a bit of a dick.

Student [7]: My suspicion is as the course goes on they will take less and less notice of student feedback . They will come to a point in the next 2 years where they are reasonably happy with the structure of that bit of the course, and they will keep it.

Rachel: Do you mean they will get to a point where they think, "We're happy with the course, and these are peoples' reactions to the course and that's to do with them"?

Student [7]: Yes. The feedback becomes informative of that group of students, and not- And no longer of the course that they are teaching.

Just as the student might feel unwilling to pester the lecturer with problems that they perceive to be their own, they may also be loathe to criticise a lecturer in anticipation of a negative reaction. Both situations would result in the student appearing unwilling, or unable, to cope with the demands of higher education study.

Students were also anxious about the potential their feedback might be discounted by the lecturer as invalid. Their anxiety centred on the suspicion that the lecturer would deflect the 'blame' on the assumption that a student's dislike or dissatisfaction reflects a misconception of the demands of higher education study. Whilst students' feedback is discounted, 'blame' is also projected back onto the students. Student feedback becomes information used in judgement of the student. The student has become the source of the problem, rather than the source of feedback on a problem.

Alternatively, this student feels that it is the lecturer who will be exposed by student feedback. She feels moral objection to threatening others and hurting their feelings. Whilst other students suggest explain that the resentful lecturer might also then penalise the student in terms of their marks, this student's concern is that criticism might also bear the cost of a damaged relationship with the lecturer - this is a relationship on which students place great value (see below):

Student [3]: I'm generally quite happy, because I sort of work with what I've got really. Mostly I don't like to sort of upset people. ... I can understand that the lecturers might feel a bit exposed, which is why I don't like filling them out particularly. ... And the trouble is by the final year I just know the people well, and I get on well with the lecturers generally, and that's why I don't like filling them out.

Student feedback: Many students felt that student feedback should be a negotiation of points of view. Students needed to feel in control of the process of criticism in order to

minimise the potential penalties of giving criticism. In a live discussion the student is also more able to judge and respond to the lecturer's reaction, and to ameliorate the impact of negative criticism. Yet even live discussion is risky, because the lecturer's authority and powers of sanction are intimidating. There is a social code implicit to this conventional understanding such that giving criticism is a question of moral scruple:

Student [2]: You can take your feedback to the Staff/Student Liaison Committee, but how many of those people, elected students, are going to be confident enough to go in and slate a course in front of half a dozen lecturers or whatever, when the person responsible for that course is sitting there?

That students censored their own views, and were cautious in their approaches to giving criticism, is an expression of perceived power relations. Students tailor their actions out of intimidation; they fear sanction, and these fears induce levels of self-subjugation. The question of a student's 'right' to speak out is contentious for both the lecturer and the student. Students will not 'speak out' simply because others have invested them with a new, externally constructed, role and identity. They also feel the means made available to them are inadequate. These issues concern the nature of 'empowerment' (see the conclusion to this chapter).

4.2.4 Unaccountable

When making a purchase, a customer is assumed largely indifferent to their relationship with the supplier. Even though a good relationship may lead to favourable terms of purchase, the customer is still then primarily concerned with advancing their own interests. Moreover, the customer will not be held to account for that relationship, or suffer penalties if relations are not good. This implies that the 'student-customer' will have little regard for the terms and conditions of their relationship to a lecturer:

Self-interest: Many students described student feedback in terms of other peoples' reactions to the activity. Other students are both positive and dismissive. Students was their own engagement with student feedback as a means to help the lecturer; the student completes a form, or participates in discussion out of concern for the lecturer's professional development:

Rachel: What are they for do you think, these forms?

Student [6]: To help the lecturers hopefully [laugh] in structuring their courses, or the course organisers.

Student [4]: He was doing it merely to improve the course. And everyone respected that and said what they thought went well.

Student feedback: Students attempted to make their own feedback as helpful as

possible; they claimed they tried hard to make reasonable responses. Their perception that the feedback should also be 'truthful' is complicated by their idea of 'truth': to them, 'truth' implies a level of objectivity. Given that the students acknowledge that their views are subjective and relative, and that they acknowledge that progress in learning is contingent on their own activity, student feedback becomes a difficult dilemma:

Student [6]: I think that they should have a discussion- Like seminars and things you should have an actual discussion on- I think a 1 to 5 basis doesn't always work ... if you have got these questions that then discussing them, rather than just putting a 3 down or a 2 down and then not saying why you put it as a 2 or why you put it as a 5- It doesn't answer the question.

This student feels that students also need time for reflection, if the student is to be as helpful as possible:

Student [7]: They tend to be on the last section, and they give you like 15 minutes, and some of it's really difficult. it would be more sensible to take them away and take them back. ... Some of the questions would require you to think over what you've taught, and what was the best, what was the worst, and those kind of things. And within a short period of reflection like that it's not easy to do that.

Rachel: To do yourself justice or to do the questions justice?

Student [7]: To do the question justice.

Unaccountable and uncaring: For the students I interviewed, the relationship between lecturer and student was a central concern: students felt as if they had to earn, maintain and take responsibility for their relationships with their lecturers. Chapter 6 examines the centrality of the relationship to processes of learning and teaching. The brief analysis here attempts to show that many of the students evidenced a level of sensitivity to their lecturers as people.

From the students' points of view the relationship between student and lecturer is a contract. The contract is both social and educational, a mutual and two-way obligation and duty; students do not define the contract in terms of marketised relations, automatic entitlements and demands. For the student, the meaning of earning, maintaining and taking responsibility for their relationships with lecturers is in part a question of observing social norms.

Students felt that relationships are established and maintained through demonstrating awareness of, and sensitivity to, the different lecturers' different personal feelings and motivations. Student 3 (above) feels an obligation not to hurt the feelings of those she has got to know. This student looks amongst lecturers for those with whom he identifies personally:

Student [7]: it's to do with how available they want to be to students. What all relationships have, it's like somebody you found interesting that you want to talk with or you want to relate to ... When I had a worry ... I knew I would get an honest opinion. There was a relationship there between us. I knew she would be straight- forward and be good to talk to.

What students look for in the lecturer and in the relationship is the reciprocation of moral obligation and concern for individuals. The students' concerns with reciprocity are frustrated in a context that they perceive to be isolating and anonymous. Moreover, students often claimed that lecturers were elusive. That they found their lecturers hard to find, not only means they are unable to resolve their 'problems'; it also reinforces the perception that lecturers do not recognise that the social contract is two-way process. Students reacted to these 'breaches of contract' with considerable amounts of frustration; yet this is frustration tinged with anxiety. It is not an indication of litigious righteousness.

Student [4]: I find that a bit weird here, because I don't- I can't just go, "Oh fuck I don't get it", as I did at [HND university]. Here you are like, "Shit I can't find-", I can't find my tutor for like 2 weeks sometimes. She's only here on 1 day a week. And that's a nightmare, that is a complete nightmare. Because you are thinking, "I've got this really big important thing to discuss", and there's no one here to discuss it with you.

The perception, that the SEQ is merely an administrative and bureaucratic act on the part of the inert institution, reinforces students' perceptions of the university context. The SEQ is the antithesis of social interaction, and of what students feel progresses relationships with their lecturers. Students experience the SEQ as an activity pursued on a one-way dynamic to the lecturers, through invisible processes, and with indeterminate impact. Given the idea that the social 'contract' is a two-way process, the SEQ is both frustrating and alienating: the SEQ is symbolic of the divides and distance between students and lecturers. An extract that I used in Chapter 1 to illustrate the students'

experience of student feedback as paper-pushing, can now be understood further: an adequate process of student feedback would be one in which the mutual, two-way social contract is upheld by both the student and the lecturers:

Student [5]: They don't ask for student feedback enough. At the end of your course they give you this little piece of paper, "Were you satisfied with your course?" I filled in every single one of them last year, "No, I am not satisfied". And I gave valid reasons why. I put my name on each one, "Please contact if you would like to talk about this". Not one of them contacted me, not one of them. And that is what they call feedback? That's bollocks if you ask me. ... They just hand you this piece of paper, they don't even tell you what it's for. ... And then at the end of the day you aren't getting any feedback on what you've said. ... And what is the inspiration to write, "Yes satisfactory course, but maybe this would help", write something down? Everybody's going to be like, "Yes whatever", because they don't do anything about it: "Let's just chuck these things on the back burner".

Students rationalised that their experiences were merely further lessons in what a university context 'is like'. Learning to deal with isolation is one of the lessons that they have to recognise and manage to cope with: it is the flip side of independence.

Student [4]: I think they just believe that you have come here because you want to learn and if you are not prepared to learn just, "Go home!". ... I'd imagine that attitude from most lecturers, and I think that's fair enough. Although sometimes you need a bit of encouragement, ... maybe a bit more personal interaction sort of, 'You'll be all right'.

Student feedback: Establishing and enjoying good social relations with lecturers is one of the more significant aspects of the students' experience of higher education. The students felt considerable degrees of accountability for their own actions. For students, what is contentious is the feeling that the two-way social contract is neither recognised nor upheld by lecturers. Yet when a student *does* feel a degree of response and attention from the lecturer students are motivated to reciprocate: to affirm and continue that contract. The following extract shows how, from the student's point of view, reciprocal response and attention is the cornerstone of successful student feedback:

Student [1]: The lecturer I mentioned earlier, he chose 30 people at random to meet with him every couple of weeks to discuss how the course was going. You would go and see him and talk about it. I can't remember what I wrote, but I remember writing a long list- I wrote a long letter to him, anonymously, so I don't know what his response was. And I think quite a few people did because he was asking for it. He was obviously really concerned that he was teaching well, and he would listen, you could tell that, so he would listen to whatever you had to say. A lot of people, even if they didn't like his teaching, they definitely liked his motives, they definitely saw that he was the most concerned for us, and the most teacher-like of the lecturers.

4.2.5. Control

The explicit purpose of collecting feedback from customers is to improve a product in accordance with their views. This brings benefits to both customer and supplier: the former maximises profits and the latter experiences increased levels of satisfaction. The

implication of this is that the customer exerts levels of control over the product.

Furthermore, because the process of communication is central to product development, it is also likely that the supplier will attempt to maximise the benefits of the communication process. This entails making sure that the process of communication is compatible with the customer's preferences. In this way, the customer also has high levels of control over the process of communication.

In Chapter 1 I argued that the SEQ constructs a relation of dependency between the lecturer and the student: the student is reliant on the lecturer's levels of interest in and motivation to act on student feedback. Furthermore, and in part because students are not party to the processes of interpretation and response, students are unconvinced that lecturers place high value on the information gleaned, and rarely experience change in response to their feedback.

In Chapter 3 I argued that lecturers claim the right to 'define the problem' of teaching and learning; this implies that deliberation is undertaken, and thus controlled by the lecturer. Students' uncertainty and frustration with the process of communication centres on a difference between hearing and listening. They were unsure whether their views had been heard; they were certain that filling in a questionnaire does not constitute being listened to.

I argued, in Chapter 3, that lecturers are concerned to demonstrate concern for students; it followed that they felt the need to convince students that the results of the SEQ were taken into account. Yet it was difficult for them to realise this concern, because of

various concerns with both the value and validity of the information. These issues are expanded upon in Chapters 5 and 6.

Of relevance here is that lecturers feel obliged to use this method of student feedback.

At the same time, the students do not feel they are in a position to reject this method and demand alternatives: students simply deride and dismiss the SEQ, and unobtrusively and independently find their own means of gaining a listening ear:

Student [3]: ... people just sort of think, "Oh yeah", fill in a few things and give it back again. I think possibly if they had a problem with the lecturer they would go about it some other way.

For students, the instances of 'successful' feedback occur when they are involved in a process of active participation or when the lecturer shows personal motivations for the activity, and personal concern for the individual student or for a cohort's views and progress. Most typically, the instances of student feedback are interactive, oral and aural. In a live discussion, students feel that they have a greater degree of control over the process of communication. Moreover, discussion enables a process of argumentation. This student feels that student feedback will be more effective when students and lecturers are working together, are not intimidated by each other, and share mutual interest in the activity itself:

Student [1]: The Staff Student Liaison Committee is really useful. I don't know how often they've met, it's once or twice a term, where they actually have students and staff meeting. And they do seem to be productive. Students aren't scared of the- Generally people who stand for the SSLC

aren't scared of the lecturers anyway, and the lecturers don't look down on the students. I think it's a good thing because they seem to work together. ... They're making changes after SSLC meetings. I think that's the way something's structured and recognised by the students and the department.

Student feedback: In many ways students' perceptions suggest a cautiously positive view that the student might be able to influence change, given the correct conditions and tools. Yet the SEQ neither enables the student to control the process of communication, nor enables them to exert influence on higher educational provision. Whilst it is the dominant concept of student feedback, and a method aligned to the tools, interests and purposes of the market and manager, the SEQ does not enable the student to realise their role as 'student-customer'. This is a paradox.

It is an irony that the method students feel most effective is a qualitative, and professional-client focused form of student feedback. This is the concept of student feedback rejected by policy makers who enforce bureaucratic-rational modes of management and attempt to restructure higher education in terms of the marketplace. It is an unfortunate contradiction however, that control of provision is a contest fought by professionals and managers, through various definitions of students' role, rights and needs, and that the student is not participant to this contest in any authoritative sense. Whilst this struggle centres on information that neither lecturers nor students value, the student is squeezed out of a process that might lead to change. Rather than empower the 'student-customer', student feedback renders the student disenfranchised and

disempowered.

4.3. Students' sense of self and the 'good student'

Students are people who enter higher education with their own personal biographies, aspirations, problems, preferences, and family circumstances. The student also operates in different contexts throughout their experience of higher education, both within and outside the university: students have jobs, families, old friends and commitments to other organisations. Students find new friendship groups, join societies, have hobbies etc. Yet research typically construes the student in terms of their classroom activities: research interests focus on the impact of a single aspect of the student's identity, such as a biographical or demographic attribute, on the student's progress in learning (Silver and Silver 1997). The research image of the student does not reveal or construct a representative or holistic image of 'the student'.

The student identity is multi-faceted and fragmented: at one and the same time a student has numerous roles to play. This next student considers herself in terms of the way she uses her time whilst 'at' university. This includes time spent outside both the classroom and the institution; being 'herself' involves negotiating time spent 'as a student' and time spent pursuing other dimensions and roles:

Student [6]: [Getting a degree takes] perseverance, a bit of natural talent, persistence, deviousness (laugh)- ... Trying to allocate your time the right way ... being able to fit everything in.

and to still have time left to be able to do what you want to do (laugh). ... My life at [this university] does not just consist of doing my degree. It's changed me in a whole manner of ways that aren't connected to my degree. On that side hopefully it has taught me how to learn in a different way, how to look at things in different ways and stuff. ... But I feed off different areas. And the great thing about a university in learning and doing a degree is that you are feeding your brain and you are feeding lots of different parts of it. And I might be doing lights for a band or for a rave and I'm feeding one part, and then I'm sitting there and doing a [subject] essay, and feeding another part, and then doing a homework exercise for [a different subject] and then going and doing company accounts for a marketing company, and then- Do you know what I mean? Sitting in the bar with my mates. The thing is that it's an all round experience.

Students are members of a peer group: and are both similar and different to others within the student community; other students are competition, potential friends, and benchmarks by which to gauge what is 'normal':

Student [5]: You make your friends and everything and you meet people, and you think it's all about meeting these people, and making more friends and more friends and becoming a part of a group, and becoming a part of the entirety. But at the end of the day you can make these friends and there's a difference. ... As my friend says, "You will have an awful lot of mates when you leave university, but very few friends, true friends". You have got to look after yourself. Because no one else is going to look out for you apart from your true friend. And you've got to look after them.

Student [6]: I think there are, there are groups [here] that do evolve. As certain years leave, people leave, people take their place, and it does seem to separate people into little groups. ...
The American Football lot, the people that sit in the Union Cafe-Bar ...

Student [4]: I felt sort of quite privileged [to be at this university]. I was sort of looking round and looking at the other students, knowing that- Like my friend's on this course, [subject], and there were only 9 places for the year. And there were just 100s and 100s of applicants, and I was sitting there thinking, "God, I'm here too". So it's more actually the students putting you under pressure than the lecturers I think.

Student [2]: I just didn't feel that I had the confidence to do that, unless there were other people who felt the same way. And nobody else seemed to feel the same way about the course.

Yet students were often also loath to identify with their own descriptions of the 'typical' student:

Student [2]: You'll find that if you walk out into that bar now you'll find very few people who'll say, "I absolutely adore my subject. I would never have considered doing anything else, if I couldn't have done that I would have fought to do it". They are all saying, "Well it's a degree, I've got to do it". But whilst I say that that is true, given that I am here, I might as well get involved in my degree. And I know full well that very few people in exactly same position care particularly. It's not that I'm wonderful, aren't I fabulous. But I don't want them to go through the tough time I've had.

Students' sense of self is grounded on difference and dependency, on 'acceptability' and 'acceptance'. As 'student', the individual is part of an homogeneous category; students conceptualised the student role and identity as that of learner; the student is a member of a group that has purpose and status relative to that of the lecturer. Yet students are also different from other students: they find their own individual friendship groups, and pursue roles other than that of 'student' both within and outwith the university.

The tensions that exist between personal-self, peer-self and student-self construct a picture of the student as a vulnerable figure. The student has to juggle, reconcile and make sense of these multiple roles. Students feel they should play the student-role such that they will be accepted and rewarded within the academic community; just as friendship groups are key to support and survival, students strive for acceptance and a feeling belonging within the academic community. Students perform according to their own understanding of the standards implied by the role of 'student'; the standards set by the academic community are a dominant concern. Goffman argues that,

In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. ... qua performers, individuals are concerned ... with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realised. ... The self ... is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from the scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern is whether it will be credited or discredited (Goffman 1980:243-245).

Forms of student feedback that focus solely on the student's perceptions of learning and teaching in the classroom produce information that is decontextualised. Students' perceptions are inherently connected to their own biographies, feelings, frustrations and experiences of different educational and social contexts during and prior to higher education. Collecting information in a manner that does not allow expression of the individual and subjective reasoning for a given perspective produces both a fractured and meaningless set of data and leaves the lecturer with inadequate means to interpret the results. Simultaneously the data captures a one-dimensional picture of the student, producing a distorted image at the same time as ignoring and devaluing dimensions that affect the students' perceptions.

The 'good student': Students' descriptions of their attitudes and approaches to student feedback relate to their perceptions of the terms and conditions of 'acceptability' and 'acceptance'. It is in this context that the idea of the 'good student' derives; yet the 'good student' is a role that is distinct from, and often stands in tension with other ideas the student has of his or her own nature and interests. The 'good student' is independent, hard-working, pragmatic, constructive, socially competent, non-demanding and unobtrusive. The good student is self-reliant, likeable and neither stands out, nor sticks their neck out. The role the 'good student' plays is one of deference and conformism: students understand themselves to be subject to the conventions and norms applicable to an academic context; they defer and conform to the standards they believe are expected of them.

Yet lecturers paint a somewhat different picture of the 'good student'. For lecturers, the good student is indeed self-reliant and undemanding, and yet is also memorable, original, a risk-taker, shows initiative, and is prepared to both determine, and give voice to, their own opinion. The 'good student' is interesting to the lecturer precisely because s/he is challenging and has personal rapport with the lecturer. The 'good student' is successful because sh/e does not conform to convention.

Lecturer [7]: Last year I had an absolutely wonderful student. She was uncertain of herself, but ... all I'd had to do really was set her off in the right direction, and when she needed help or reassurance she would come and get it. ... it was easy, because she was doing the stuff. ... So I mean she was teaching herself. ... Whereas this year's had demonstrated little understanding of what it was he was doing, certainly no enthusiasm. I think if anything I gave him more time this year than I gave the student last year. ... I mean the student this year was technically very good. When he put his mind to it he could do the work. But there wasn't any spark- It was very mechanistic. It was just, "What do I do now?".

...

[cont.] One student about 3 or 4 years ago- A slightly oddball student. In his project report, in the acknowledgements he just put his thanks. "Thanks to [Lecturer 7] who I thought was a brick", or something like that (laugh). ... Most students wouldn't probably have that 'oddity' if you like (laugh). Just wouldn't have that parallel thinking almost, to say well "I can say what I think here".

...

[cont.] One of the students came and asked me- She was doing a literature survey, and wanted to find a paper I had referred to, a bit of data, in one of the lectures, and she used my first name. And that's sort of- It's surprising, but pleasant- ... Usually, most are not sure where the distance

is, and it's safe to start with Dr., and only use the first name when they know it's safe to do so. ... I think perhaps I was communicating, at least with that one student in a much more relaxed way, or she was more confident. I mean she is a very, very able student, I mean she's marked down for a first.

The students' ideas of the 'good student' suggest that student feedback is a problematic issue. In contrast to this, the general idea of allowing students the right to 'voice' is compatible with lecturers' ideas of the assertive student who is prepared to argue their point of view. In respect of both these perspectives, what appears necessary is a form of interaction that promotes a higher level of student self-confidence, and that develops levels of security conducive to risk-taking and exploration. This form of interaction would mean that 'standing-out' would not be a sanctionable offence or potential risk of non-acceptance. Rather, the development and articulation of original insights and views, to which the individual is personally committed, becomes a central objective.

Yet in this context, the SEQ fails as a form of interaction between 'the student' and the lecturer: it is not a reciprocal, inter-personal form of communication; it pre-figures asymmetrical communicative dynamics and unequal power relations - despite lecturers' perceptions that the student has more power. It allows only categorical and anonymous judgements that are received with unknown impact and reaction. For lecturers it represents the threats inherent to the wider political agenda for higher education, and, for both students and lecturers, it renders communications mutually threatening and divisive:

Lecturer [15]: I don't know because I think that it's the old answer isn't it, that they find it more difficult to talk to people who they recognise as being in a position of authority over them. And there are things they want to say, but it is difficult to say. And questionnaires are one way of doing it, anonymously, but that's not the best way, because that tends to become a very unfeeling experience. I'm an old softy when it comes to the crunch. I think that we have to recognise that we are all on the same side. And questionnaires do produce an appraiser and an appraised, and that creates straight away, I think, a division. The very division you are trying to avoid when you teach a group. I mean , theoretically you are all trying to head the same way.

4.4 Conclusion

Identity ... is what you say you are according to what they say you can be'

(Johnston 1973) ... identities are ... conceived within certain ideological frameworks constructed by the dominant social order to maintain its own interests. Identities, in this analysis, are profoundly political (Kitzinger 1989:82).

Ideology ... participates in the construction of that individual so that he or she can act. Ideology is a practice of representation; a means to produce a specific articulation, that is producing certain meanings and necessitating certain subjects as their supports (Coward and Ellis 1977:67).

The concept of the 'student-customer' is an ideological construct that contests traditional

roles and relations within the university. It demands a re-interpretation of the meaning of 'student' and necessitates that the student perform a different role. However, students' perceptions of their own role and identity paint a picture that is difficult to reconcile with the image of the 'student-customer'. As both symbol of, and strategic tool within, a 'politics of representation' student feedback fails to effect new market-based relations and forces of influence. It fails, in part, because students do not perceive the role and identity of the 'student-customer' to be appropriate to, or compatible with their view of the 'good student'. It also fails because the dominant method obstructs the student from attempting to bring change by engaging in terms they feel are appropriate and acceptable to the academic community.

Fears of the litigious, vociferous, lazy and draining 'student-customer' are a dynamic within the 'politics of representation': they are arguments that contest the legitimacy and imperatives of the 'student-customer' on the basis of pejorative hypotheses. My own analysis suggests that these are unfounded fears. Yet students' own assertions are also dynamics within the 'politics of representation': students present themselves in terms acceptable to the ideology of the academic profession. It appears that from the student's point of view, and despite the advent of discourses of the 'student-customer', the student is complicit in maintaining that ideological framework, and in sustaining the powers of the academic profession to define the role and identity of the student.

Students' interpretations of the meaning of roles, responsibilities and relations within the university conflict with, and resist the rise of, the discursive and ideological construct of the 'student-customer'. However students views are problematic: many of the extracts

from students that I have used in Chapters 1 to 4 in Section Two of this study evidence high degrees of conformism and deference, and a lack of assertion about the issues that do leave students feeling frustrated and anxious..

Empowerment and the ‘student-customer’: Significantly, my analysis of students’ views suggests that student-empowerment is not achieved through the terms and conditions of market-place roles, identities and relations. Neither is it achieved by the introduction of structures, procedures and techniques of the market place. Yet students’ own ideas of the terms, limits and conditions of ‘empowerment’ are a complex problem. The idea that change is best achieved through processes that reflect the norms and conventions of higher education is, in part, a reflection of the students’ deference and conformity within the structures and processes of the academic culture.

Student-empowerment is also contingent on a contradiction. As explained by the following lecturer, empowerment cannot be ‘ordained’ or ‘conferred’; this is merely the illusion of empowerment. The illusion masks a situation in which the ‘empowered’ is still dependent on those who ‘empower’, because these retain the powers to retract their decisions:

Lecturer [11]: I hate all this talk of empowerment, it really makes me feel sick. I don’t want to empower my students because I think it’s ludicrous. The concept of empowerment suggests that it is mine to give. And I think that if you really care about equality then you don’t talk about empowerment.

Rather, it is the student who has to recognise and overcome what it is that constrains them; this includes recognising and understanding self-imposed constraints.

Empowerment has to be determined and generated by the individual; the individual has to see themselves, and act, as an empowered self:

It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught ... In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. ... Self depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalisation of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. They call themselves ignorant and say the "professor" is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen (Freire 1970:38, 44-45).

The student's success within higher education *is* dependent on others' judgements of their progress and capacities; their experience of higher education is punctuated by assessment. This means that whilst it is the student's responsibility to recognise and fulfil empowerment, paradoxically, students will be still dependent on others' judgements. Although the student must recognise and overcome what constrains them and thereby empower themselves, the student has to reconcile a dilemma. The student must determine and express their own view of legitimate behaviour, at the same time as success will still depend on others' assessments of what is acceptable.

The terms and conditions of 'empowerment' are not provided or established by the discourse of the 'student-customer'. Students' interpretations of the meanings of the university context, and of the messages conveyed by student feedback are profoundly negative and contradictory. The traditions of the academic ideology conflate with the alienating experience of mass higher education and leave the student without a sense of agency or self-control. Students learn to survive in isolation; this lesson stands in tension with their perceptions that the student is constrained by constant observation and judgement. The former is not independence, the latter generates conformism; both are the opposite of empowerment.

ⁱ Since the interviews with students were conducted, the introduction of tuition fees has transformed students customers in a literal sense. Whilst the the chapter concludes that students feel 'customer' behaviour inappropriate, discussion reveals that, owing to the perceived culture of academic institutions, the introduction of tuition fees is likely to heighten students frustration with their identity - either as students or 'student-customers'. This issue is ripe for further investigation.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER FIVE

Contesting the curriculum: redefining the purpose of higher education

Changes in higher education and its environment mean that it is no longer reasonable to assume that academics and students share an unspoken understanding of the purposes of higher education or of the intended aims and standards of programmes of study. In an open society in which accountability is valued it is not reasonable to expect employers, students and those who fund them to accept the standards and outcomes of higher education on the basis of unquestioning trust. Greater explicitness of aim and outcome is required ... it will also help staff to ensure that they employ the most appropriate means to facilitate and assess students' learning. Such explicitness would also serve to avoid mismatches between, on the one hand, the actual attainment of students and, on the other, the expectations that employers have of them (HEQC 1997:7; my emphases).

Achievements of Students. Academic standards and the quality of teaching in higher education need to be judged by reference mainly to students' achievements. ... The subsequent employment patterns of students provide some indication of the value of higher education courses to working life. Evaluation of institutional performance also requires students' achievements to be set alongside their entry standards. Greater attention needs to be given to these questions both nationally and by institutions; and the essential data on performance in each institution should be published so that its record

can be evaluated by the funding agencies, governing bodies, students and employers (DES 1987:18; my emphases).

Feedback Mechanisms. Audit has placed considerable importance on the need for appropriate feedback mechanisms to obtain information from those most affected by the work of universities - student graduates, employers, professional bodies. In the *Annual Report 1992*, it was reported that student feedback was being widely sought in a variety of ways, some of which were effective, others less so. ... In most universities, audit teams found that there were periodic and major reviews of postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. ... Reviews would involve the programme being considered against the design objectives. ... In addition, students' views would be systematically canvassed and integrated into the review process via questionnaires, and staff/student liaison committees (HEQC 1994b:xvii, 23; my emphases).

Over the last decade or so, UK higher education has devoted increasing attention to the creation and development of formal mechanisms for quality assurance and - particularly in the last three years - to the clarification and comparison of academic standards. ... the interlocking sets of activities which had hitherto been through adequate to assure academic standards no longer suffice. ... these long-standing, but relatively informal, practices need to be strengthened and supplemented by the establishment of new formal, collective mechanisms to assure standards (HEQC 1997:3; my emphases).

Student [2]: It took me quite a while to decide which degree I was going to do. I was never dead set on the degree. I was you know, a fortnight away from applying to do French degrees, in which case I probably wouldn't be at this university now, and probably wouldn't have done half the things I have done. I think [lecturers] do acknowledge that, they do see that there is very limited commitment to the subject, and the commitment is more to the dollar at the end of it. And so maybe [lecturers] therefore ask themselves, "Well these people are not here to contribute to the study of the field, they are here to do 3 years of purgatory before they go out and get some money." And [lecturers] therefore say, "Well next year's students aren't going to be any different, why should we make that any better for them?" Perhaps that's just me being a right old cynic again!

Introduction

In Section One, Chapter 5, a discourse analysis of the use of 'quality' identified student feedback as a means to monitor and re-orientate the purpose and process of academic work. Within that analysis I claimed that the idea of 'academic standards' was defined in terms of, and geared towards government values and interests; these interests focus on the needs of employers, industry and commerce. Student feedback is a mechanism that positions the student as conduit of external forces: the interests of the 'student-customer' are assumed to centre on the fit between the needs of their future employers and the goals and standards of particular degree programmes; their feedback to lecturers will reflect these interests.

In Chapter 3 of the current section of the study, I argued that lecturers claim a

professional tradition of concern for students' and their needs as learners in a subject-discipline. There, I argued that whilst student feedback represents an assault on lecturers' claims to professionalism, the formalised, standardised, bureaucratic nature of the activity rendered student feedback both insulting and without value, in respect of the lecturer's 'professionalism'. Chapter 4 examined students' views on the 'student-customer'. I argued that students would prefer a form of student feedback that enabled a process of mutual questioning and negotiation; this would enable them to seek support for their own learning from the 'authoritative experts'.

In this chapter I examine lecturers' views about the relationship between student feedback and 'academic standards'. For lecturers, student feedback represents and generates a set of imperatives for their teaching and the curriculum; yet lecturers contest these signals and demands. Contest over the right to 'define the problem' of teaching and course provision is experienced as a struggle to mediate these imperatives and thereby *safeguard* the student's personal and intellectual development. Lecturers define the object and purpose of students' development in terms of academic, educational and graduate standards; the concept of standards is tightly connected to the demands of the subject-discipline.

First, I argue that government policy and statutory texts define 'academic standards' in terms of students' attainments, or 'learning outcomes'. The concept of learning outcomes implies an input-output model of teaching and learning: learning is defined as an effect of teaching; the student is identified as a 'product' of higher education. The role of student feedback is twofold. It is a quantitative performance indicator, an

instrument within the quality assurance systems designed to monitor whether teaching and the curriculum are adequate to 'produce' required 'learning outcomes'. It is also a means by which the student becomes 'student-[as-product]-as-customer'; the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' can effect changes to teaching and curriculum such that the desired outcomes are achieved.

Second, I examine lecturers' views on the student as 'student-[as-product]-as-customer'.

I argue that their concerns centre on the tension between the imperatives of a device that positions the student as 'student-[as-product]-as-customer', and their perception that the professional academic has a responsibility to promote and maintain academic, educational and graduate standards.

Third, I claim that lecturers define the relationship between teaching and learning is an educational contract, in which both students and lecturers share mutual responsibility for attainment in, and the benefits of, higher education. Within this, teaching stimulates learning, but learning is the responsibility of the student. However quality assurance systems advocate the use of a form of student feedback - the SEQ - that stands in tension with the idea of an educational contract. It reflects a reductionist, technicist concept of teaching; this approach to evaluation and performance assessment considers the teaching-learning relation as if the central dynamic were the activity of the teacher.

Fourth, I argue that lecturers contest the validity of students' feedback by questioning its status as 'objective' data. Yet the requirement that data be 'objective' is a reflection of the methodological assumptions that underpin the SEQ. Furthermore, the underlying

source of contention and frustration is the low utility-value of the data: this has less to do with the student than it has with the inadequate content of the data. I raise the question of what lecturers need to know and learn about their teaching, and the character of this form of knowledge. The issues behind this, and the question of how this form of knowledge might be generated are dealt with in the subsequent chapter, Chapter 6.

I conclude that lecturers deride student feedback for reason of its lack of utility, and dismiss it on the grounds of concern for the maintenance of academic, educational and graduate standards. Significantly however, these concerns originate in a *loyalty* to both discipline and student. Thus it is not a contradiction that lecturers evidence a range of strategies to mediate the imperatives of student feedback and the assumed impact of the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer'. Yet contention over the low utility-value of the data conflates with negativity concerning both the direct imperatives that student feedback signals and the wider agenda in which it is embedded. This is expressed as doubt concerning the legitimacy and validity of the student 'voice'.

5.1. Academic standards, 'graduateness' and learning 'outcomes': the student as input and output

Barnett (1994:70) argues that 'each move on the part of the state has brought a deeper involvement in the inner life of academic institutions, such that now the state is intervening in the character *both* of the student experience and of the teacher-student transactions'. Within this, each move has attempted redefinition of both the *concept*

and *purpose/content* of the curriculum.

Curriculum purposes/content, 'graduateness': The concept of 'graduateness' (HEQC 1996d, 1997:5) involves a definition of 'academic standards' as:

explicit levels of academic attainment that are used to describe and measure academic requirements and achievements of individual students and groups of students.

The concept 'graduateness' is one of end outputs: the attributes required of a graduate student. Interest in defining 'graduateness' rests on the assumption that 'the development of effective means by which to identify the intended outcomes and specific features of degrees ... will make it easier for employers to decide whether graduates possess the skills and other qualities that they require for work' (HEQC 1997:13). In the context of quality assurance, interest in 'academic standards' also rests on the further assumption that 'standards of intended and actual attainment ... are the basis for deciding the choice of methods of teaching and learning; and provide a reference point from which to evaluate the quality provided and experienced' (HEQC 1997:5). A redefinition of academic standards as 'graduateness' redefines the purpose and goals of higher education, and assumes leverage over what is taught and for which purposes.

Barnett (1994:42-3) argues that this utilitarian, instrumental concept of higher education reflects a social trend, in which knowledge is conceptualised and valued in terms of its

‘performativity’. That is, knowledge has value in terms of its suitability for instrumental ends, rather than for the benefits it brings to those engaged with it. This engagement is the process through which knowledge is generated; it necessitates and stimulates understanding, a capacity for metacriticism and wisdom. In contrast to the idea of engagement, the instrumental concept of knowledge predicate the role of the student as ‘assimilator’; the graduate is an accumulation of stocks of knowledge and skills; higher education is a production line: ‘things are done to’ student inputs such that uniform, prespecified end outputs are produced.

The concept of curriculum; ‘learning outcomes’: The idea of ‘learning outcomes’ implies that learning is an effect of teaching, that teaching is a generic act of orchestrating and organising the delivery of content, and that the teaching-learning relation is a technical question of adapting teaching to the demands of subject content and required outcomes. An alternative perspective would not define and categorise classroom processes, objects and goals in this way. From this perspective there would be no analytic distinctions, nor causal relations between what others call teaching, learning and content. Here, the actors and objects of an educational experience constitute and define the curriculum; their activity generates and realises the ‘curriculum’. The processes and outcomes of the ‘curriculum,’ are therefore complex, multiple and indeterminate.

The idea of ‘learning outcomes’ is predicated upon a technicist concept of teaching, learning and content. It assumes also that these are related in predictable and

determinate ways. The logic of 'learning outcomes' is that specific definitions of required outcomes necessitate specific changes in teaching and content. Given these assumptions it *appears* logical that monitoring and assessment of teaching, and of its 'fit' with content, will provide assurance that the 'learning outcomes' are likely to be achieved. Furthermore, it *appears* logical that these assessments will provide a measure of the quality of teaching performances within the institution.

The student as product: Biggs (1994:15-16) argues that the idea that institutional performance can be measured is indicative of an input-output model of higher education. Outputs are valued in terms of cost-effectiveness and value for money:

"Performance indicators" is the leading term given to [the] currency [in which accountability is transacted], and at its lowest would define output in relation to input, and the higher that ratio the better ... a quantitative mind-set seems to be setting constraints ... on the structure of degree programmes and how they are to be delivered and accounted for institutionally. The classroom is quite evidently a subsystem within the larger institutional system ... It is very difficult for teachers to construct a qualitative framework for their students to operate within, when they themselves have to operate within a framework of quantitatively defined performance indicators.

For Biggs, the central concern is that both this concept of performance, and the quantitative approach to performance evaluation, have negative implications for

classroom practice. Quantitative evaluation requires that learning is identified as discrete categories of output, each of which are the end product of specific instances of teaching performance. Thus, as with 'learning outcomes' and 'graduateness', the input-output model allows the assumption that the evaluation of teaching provides adequate assurance that the student will be 'produced' with the desired attributes.

The implication of this approach to performance evaluation fits with a concept of the student as both customer and product. In each case the student is not responsible for, or agent within, their own learning. The student is the raw material to whom teaching is 'performed'. Barnett argues (1994:81-82):

Competences and outcomes cannot provide guidelines for a higher education curriculum. ... For ... competences will remain behaviours and capacities to act as desired and defined by others. To conceive the development of mind as an outcome, which is what the idea amounts to, is a hopelessly limited way of construing higher education. As with competences, outcomes represent a form of closure. They predetermine the required characteristics students should end up with. Both terms are part of a language of prejudging, imposition and inevitable narrowness. They spring from a particular form of wisdom - instrumental reason - and seek to extend its domination in the wider society into higher education, so further marginalizing other forms of interaction and reason.

Conceptualisation of academic standards as 'outcomes' transforms qualitative processes of teaching-learning-content into discrete categories, causal relations and quantities. It

allows an approach to quality assurance that focuses on teaching performances; it is compatible with a quantitative approach to performance assessment.

The student-[as-product]-as-customer: The concepts of 'graduateness' and 'learning outcomes' extend the role of the 'student-customer' in two ways. First the student becomes 'student-[as-product]-as-customer'. The 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' is a conduit for external influence on the 'inner life of academic institutions' (Barnett 1994:70), these influences are now defined in terms of a narrow set of interests. The interests of the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' are assumed to centre on the fit between the needs of their future employers and the goals and standards of particular degree programmes; the goal of the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' is that of achieving 'graduateness'. Students' feedback to lecturers will reflect the interests of the future graduate, and indicate the extent to which the teaching and content provided is perceived congruent with, and conducive to, desired outcomes. Thus *if* academics are responsive to the signals that the 'sovereign' and 'expert' 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' gives, the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' becomes a conduit for employer-influence on the role and purpose of higher education.

Second, the student-lecturer transaction is defined as the purchase and delivery of pre-specified outcomes. Because 'learning outcomes' are assumed an effect of teaching/content, any re-definition of desirable 'outcomes' necessitates a reconfiguration of teaching. This has two implications. In the first instance, student feedback is an expression of 'customer satisfaction': whether the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer's'

experience of teaching and curriculum matches their expectations and indicates to them that intended outcomes are likely to be met. In the second instance, measures of 'satisfaction' become a quantified assessment of the lecturer's performance. They thus constitute one means to assess the quality of teaching, where quality is defined as 'fitness for purpose'.

5.2. Academic, educational and graduate standards.

5.2.1 Academic standards

High scores: Most lecturers understood student feedback as a summative assessment of their performance as teachers; the logical implication of this was a felt need to achieve high scores, despite the dubious integrity of the measures:

Rachel: But you want good results, don't you?

Lecturer [6]: Yes, yes. Yes of course you do. Although you are aware that those results don't reflect perhaps the reality, or don't reflect any sort of objective academic criteria or standard.

Yet lecturers shared the view that, given the choice, students preferred easy, entertaining courses. Given this view, achieving high scores was not necessarily a laudable event:

Lecturer [4]: But for instance if I give a course of lectures, and I get a lot of negative marks down there, one way I could get round it would be to get all the students in and say "What should I have

done to make this better?”, and then take all these comments on board and do that. Now that doesn't necessarily make it a better course, what makes it is a course so that the students want to tick the high ranking boxes. So when it goes back to the office, I come out as really popular. That could just mean that I had done *Oasis* impersonations, for eighteen hours. It doesn't show that it was a good course or well thought out or anything, it shows that it was what succeeded in ticking the boxes. Now some students would address that in an objective sense and say, “Well, it was too trivial a course”. Whereas a lot of them, because- Well like because all people are lazy, intrinsically- A lot want the easy option, and so to some extent I think if you play to the students you can end up getting a course which satisfies them but which isn't necessarily better. ... So if you start to, trying to 'happify' them too much, there's a risk that your well thought out intentions get pushed aside.

The perception that students are lazy and want to be entertained implies that acting on students' wishes compromises the academic standard of the course.

Entertainment: This lecturer describes how, in a lecture, the onus on her is to entertain the students:

Lecturer [10]: Students, on the whole are lazy, they want to be spoon fed, they want to be entertained. ... What students like best are people who make the subject fun for them, which is a reflection of the students wanting to get the best possible marks, or the most possible knowledge for the least possible effort on their part (laugh). ... I will stand up and say completely outrageous things, if that's what the students want me to say ... it keeps them awake and they laugh.

The perception that students are both lazy and want to be entertained presents the lecturer with a problem. In seeking to cope with what *she* identifies as student nature, she compromises the ‘profundity’ of the course:

Lecturer [10]: I think that there are a lot of lecturers who get up there and say very very profound things, and probably more useful things than I ever say, but they say it in a very serious and not a funny way, and they get fairly low marks, which is unfair on the lecturer. ... I know that these members of staff spend hours and hours preparing far more profound lectures than I’m ever going to give, and they don’t get very good feedback ... but the fault lies with the student.

Good feedback is a paradox: it is not a signal of the integrity of performance or the lecturer’s efforts in preparation.

Academic standards as a professional responsibility: Others considered “entertaining” or “spoon-feeding” students to be a dangerous and unprofessional activity. The logic of this view was that if the lecturer concentrates on maintaining students’ interest or goodwill by making a lecture enjoyable, there is a danger that the “rigour” of the course will be “diluted” and that students’ academic achievements will be threatened:

Lecturer [12]: There are some people who feel that just optimising the scores, responding to students’ demands, to make things easier and so on, is going to dilute the material, and you end up not doing them any favours. Perhaps you can have something that they all enjoy doing, but it’s not actually teaching them anything. This is a danger. I mean my feeling is that what you’ve

got to do is keep the course academically rigorous, but attempt to make it enjoyable as well. But you mustn't sell out on the difficulties, just to make it fun. You have certain objectives, certain learning objectives you have to meet - and you mustn't dilute those. You can't sort of chop those down because the students find it enjoyable. I mean if the students weren't meeting the academic objectives at the end of the day, then you would be in trouble. People who taught them afterwards would say, "Well these students really enjoyed your lectures but they haven't learnt a thing (laugh), they've just messed around".

The danger of "optimising scores" by "responding to students' demands" for "fun" is twofold. First, students' achievements will be compromised. Second, the lecturer risks potential criticism from professional colleagues. Learning objectives are the responsibility of the professional, and are defined in academic terms.

The next lecturer also questions the relationship between students' enjoyment of a teaching event and their learning. He feels positive about creating a "jolly" atmosphere, and yet remains cautious about the significance of this. He feels that students might *mistake* a fun seminar for an effective seminar:

Lecturer [6]: I mean I do get quite often people saying "The atmosphere in the group was really good, I wasn't frightened to ask questions", and, "I knew that if I did ask questions nobody would laugh, or if they did laugh it would be everybody laughing, you know, together rather than at you". So I think I do create quite a good atmosphere. But there's also a danger in that, that you fall back on creating a nice jolly atmosphere and not do any academic work. You know have a nice chat and let things slide a bit because you don't want to spoil that atmosphere. And then at

the end of the course you'll probably end up with lots of 4s and 5s and everybody would say it was brilliant.

Engineering, morality and professionalism: Those lecturers who received high scores were either considered to have “given up” or were simply “smart arses” who “played to the audience”. Again, students are characterised as inherently lazy, and assumed better disposed to easy courses:

Lecturer [14]: now a lot of people ... are unaware of these factors that influence psychological and sociological judgements, [including] ... how difficult the subject material is, whether the lecturer is trying to drive them on to acquire new information, or whether the lecturer has kind of given up, sort of, “I’ll just teach them at a nice low level and it keeps them happy, and I get good student feedback”.

Lecturer [15]: Yes you can engineer good returns. Even with the brightest students it is possible to do things that are popular with the students, and it is possible to do things that are unpopular, and you have to make a conscious decision about whether you do things because you want to be popular, or whether you do things because you think you *should* do them. ... I mean my own view is that the real smart arses on one end, who get really brilliant returns, are probably playing to the audience.

“But the fault lies with the student”: All the above extracts contain a common set of negative assumptions about students’ attitudes and preferences. The student becomes the object of blame. Bad feedback represents the student’s *mis-perception* of the meaning of their experience; their experiences are a reflection of the demands of higher education study, where what is valuable is not necessarily fun or easy. It appears that student feedback either generates, or reproduces, negative views of the student. The views on learning expressed by students contradict the lecturers’ assumptions, and yet students also *recognise* that the lecturer may think this. Negative ideas of the student may be a reflection of a felt need to resist the imperatives of student feedback; the negative discourse is also a dynamic within the ‘politics of representation’.

Alternatively, student feedback reproduces a ‘malaise of attitudes and relationships’ and ‘a certain contempt on the part of lecturers towards at least a proportion of their students’ (R. D. Pearce 1993:28). In either case student feedback is a malignant influence in higher education.

5.2.2 Educational standards

Change: Students are also assumed resistant to change. This assumption presents the lecturer with a further dilemma: by making changes to courses in order to improve students’ progress as learners, the lecturer risks negative feedback:

Lecturer [9]: The students I talk to, and come on my courses, are more interested and more enthused if they have different things to do. But you do have to get over this initial barrier of, “Hey

this isn't like everyone else's module", and, "I'd rather have it standard and straight forward, and then I can fall asleep at the back, and automatically take notes, and worry about it later".

Lecturer [2]: the start of the next academic year, with the new first year, is the first time I'm really going to be able to 'have a go' at putting something into practice- With a group of students whose minds haven't already been set, so to speak, by an expectation of "This is how the course runs". ... with lectures our students generally expect notes that they need to take down to be written up on the board, placed on an overhead projector, whatever. ... And, as a result the odd time you try just talking, it seems to produce quite a negative sort of response. Almost they don't know how to cope with it. ... I think it's indicative of how expectations get set quite early on by the practices that we have.

What "needs to be taught": If, "like some of my colleagues" the lecturer assumes that "a lot of students don't particularly like difficult subjects" (Lecturer 2) then the lecturer needs to be stoic in the face of potentially negative feedback, and to persist with practices about which students complain:

Lecturer [15]: I actually teach among other things, [a subject] to people who're not [majors in that area], and that is always an unpopular thing. Now I know it's unpopular thing, but to be honest it needs to be taught. Now it could be taught by all sorts of interactive computing systems, informal lectures, and you can make it as palatable as you can, but at the end of the day a lot of students will hate this, and what ever pace you go at they will say, "It's too fast, or it's too difficult, or too much material". They're bound to say that.

5.2.3 Graduate standards

Lecturers' perceptions of the professional practitioner's needs: The drive to obtain good feedback might mean that the student graduates *without* the qualities adequate to professional practice in their respective subject:

Lecturer [16]: I am seeking information about the staff who are delivering the units in my Division in terms of learning experience - what the students gain from it, not how much enjoyment have they had out of it. The difference is between someone who tells you something that is of lifetime benefit for you in terms of your chosen career, or is it going to be a sort of Brian Ricks entertainment hour, where you drop your trousers, laugh, tell a joke, but at the end of it they haven't remembered a thing about the technical part of the lecture.

Lecturers' perceptions of graduates' needs: In contrast, this next lecturer feels that some students are only interested in learning what will enable their progress as future professionals in the discipline that she teaches. This compromises her academic objectives (see chapter 3):

Lecturer [10]: Students want to get as far as they can with as little possible effort. ... They don't want to engage with the information very much, they want to receive it. They don't perceive it as being useful in their final life, they only perceive it as a way of getting into the really important stuff, which is what they will do where they are a [professional in the discipline].

Moreover, she feels that students who are solely focused on their degree as a “passport” fail to maximise the benefits of higher education. Their focus is narrow, and this obstructs them from maximising both their intellectual and holistic development:

Lecturer [10]: I think the main concern that students have, and it is completely, a concern that is completely out of proportion to reality, is what's going to happen when they graduate? Will they get a job? Will they get a training place? And in the years that I've been teaching [subject] I've watched it become more and more of an obsession, with students, so they actually spend far too little time thinking about their general development as a person - their sporting skills, their social skills, their musical skills and their enjoyment of life at a period of time in their lives when they should be out having a good time. And they become absolutely obsessed with a passport to a successful profession.

Her concept of the ‘graduate’ is the professionally competent, intellectually developed and well-rounded individual. This view is also shared by the following lecturer, who identifies that students focus on the vocational value of their degree, and yet their needs extend beyond this. She hopes students recognise that the benefits of higher education extend beyond the qualification obtained by ‘learning’:

Lecturer [3]: People have different needs and wants. What they want is a qualification and they want to be able to use that to develop a career. And those are sort of fundamental. But there's a lot more associated with that. I mean you know you can get a qualification by sitting at home and reading books and writing the exam papers for someone that you never meet. You know there's more to being a student than learning, than that. And hopefully that's what they're here for.

5.3. “This nebulous curtain hanging over everything”: who is responsible for students’ learning?

An educational contract: Lecturers tended to describe the teaching-learning relation as constitutive of an educational contract. This means that both students and lecturers share mutual responsibility for progressing the outcomes of education.

Lecturer [11]: You have your ideas of what you want to learn, I have mine, he has his, he has his, he has his. They may all be over ambitious. ... I mean you as my teacher, you have got to be able to point me in the right direction, but I as your student have got to get my back into gear and get some reading done, and talking done, and thinking done, and writing done, in order to do my bit of the contract.

Within this, the lecturer’s responsibility is to provide the conditions that encourage the student’s development. Yet learning remains the responsibility of the student:

Lecturer [14]: I think students these days as well, because of this kind of ‘customer culture’, which is so inappropriate for higher education, they have a belief that the lecturing staff are there to deliver for them. But you can’t deliver learning for anyone. You know it’s the classic thing, ‘you can take a horse to water’. So all the university can do is to put in place the learning environment, but then when you enter that environment, you have to take advantage of it. No one can make you learn what you don’t want to learn, or no one can make you learn what you are unmotivated to learn.

In contrast, lecturers felt that student feedback was a one-sided interpretation of the educational contract: it misconstrued the teaching-learning relation by defining learning as an effect of the lecturer's teaching. The one-sided interpretation is problematic: it entails judgement of the lecturer's activity and yet does not acknowledge or express the student's own responsibility and activity in the process of learning:

Lecturer [15]: the one thing the questionnaire thing tends not to do is focus on students. We have to ensure that students do put their input in, in terms of reading and work. ... The questions on a questionnaire should be about half about what the teachers do, and about half what the taught is doing: "How many of you lectures do you go to?", and all this sort of, "How much reading are you doing", "What percentage of the course references do you read?". ... I mean questionnaires can be a useful teaching device. Because you do have to remind some students about their responsibilities. ... it does remind them that they have got a role in this. One of the dangers is that if you throw all the emphasis on to the teacher it may be allowing the student to focus on what is wrong with the teacher, and not think about what is wrong with them.

A more balanced form of student feedback would reflect the two-way nature of the educational contract; it would be, he feels, a *necessary* reminder to students that learning is *their* responsibility.

'This nebulous curtain': Establishing the impact of the teaching activity on the student's learning is problematic: the relationship is complex, and the identification of concise, accurate and stable connections is difficult:

Lecturer [6]: When I first came here it was off the cuff because no one told me what to do, I was just stuck in front of the lecture ... and whether it works or not is *pure luck*, really.

Rachel: Do you know what works?

Lecturer [6]: Well I'm not sure. Because, well I mean how do you measure that? ... There are all sorts of issues which come in which are not necessarily to do with how good or how bad a lecturer you are. ... I find this whole thing about evaluation and teaching effectiveness very, very difficult. Just not knowing how it is getting across. You have this experience so often, where you do, you know you do a lecture course for a year, and you get to the end of the year and somebody will put their hand up in the last lecture and [ask for basic information] And you think, (laugh) "For god's sake I've been standing here for 25 hours going into details about [that basic information] and you haven't got that. Then you ask, well is that because I didn't explain it well, or because they haven't understood it properly, and if they haven't understood it properly is that because I am not doing it right, or is it a fault with them? So I don't know. It's just very amorphous somehow, very intangible, about how to really find out how effective your teaching is. ... You get this nebulous curtain hanging over everything when it comes to student evaluation.

"It depends again on the exact context": The teaching-learning relation is further complicated by its tight connections with the subject discipline. Lecturers expressed how processes of learning and teaching are contingent on, and expressions of, the nature of the subject-discipline. This lecturer describes how the concept he is trying to explain determines his method of presentation; the artefact used appears of inferior quality to those presentation aids prepared in advance, yet these would not enable demonstration of the "very nature" of the problem:

Lecturer [7]: [Whether the questions asked are fair depends on, for example] whether your purpose is to use an overhead for them to really study in detail, or whether it's just flashing up as an illustration and then take away again. ... It's often very difficult ... to illustrate a concept with a nice neat little model diagram-type- You know, you'd have little arrows here and little arrows here, and it's all going on at the same time. There's no temporal separation of different things unless you do have 5, 6, different little panels all with arrows labelled, "This one goes to this one and this one goes to this one". I mean it's possible to do that in certain circumstances with a set of overheads, or a set of slides, one after the other, so that you can see the transition between them. And that might be a more ordered way of doing it. But typically I will have just a sheet of paper and I'll be scribbling on it, and it's only intelligible at the moment I'm writing, because it's circles and lines. And you look at it afterwards, and it's garbage. That's a *dynamic* sort of teaching aid if you like. Presentationally it can look abysmal, but it is the content that is important, and not the form. The *dynamic* nature of its scribbles is what helps.

“The basically nuts and bolts things”: Yet a second, and contradictory view of teaching was also implied within lecturer's comments. In the context of a conversation about student feedback, lecturers spoke of teaching in respect of the evaluation criteria on the SEQ. In this sense, teaching became a question of information transfer and presentation in lectures. In the context of the SEQ, the lecturer is encouraged to conceptualised the student experience in terms of classroom-based activities, where the lecturer's role is to transmit or “get across” (Lecturer 6) the knowledge that students need to “capture” (Lecturer 2):

Lecturer [12]: If people are getting consistently low scores on their questionnaires and despite being put on training - perhaps they're *trying* to improve their lecturing style - we would move them elsewhere. ... you put them perhaps into final year options and take them away from the first and second years, because they just can't get across the information.

Teaching also becomes a question of a generic set of components; these are the material, technical and physical tools required in a presentation:

Lecturer [15]: in my view, there are 2 bits to a questionnaire, and there are the basically nuts and bolts things: "Can you hear?", "Can you see?", "Are the visual materials adequate, transparent?" and so on. There are a series of common things that apply ... I think you can get proper responses: "Was the room well ventilated?", you know "Does the lecturer have mannerisms that annoy you?". I think that set of things is valuable in its own right. And I don't think that there are a lot of overtones about whether they are good or bad, I just think they're essential.

This concept of teaching is transferable across subject-disciplines, groups of students and individual lecturers. It is a generic, context-independent concept; it reflects the limitations and demands of the standardised SEQ. A universally applicable method of student feedback generates a standardised concept of teaching.

"Learning isn't in packets": The teacher-focused nature of student feedback is contingent on an analytical distinction between what counts as teaching and what counts as

learning. It also contradicts the lecturer's assertions that learning is the responsibility of the student. Many lecturers did talk of teaching and learning as two distinct activities. Yet they also took the view that a student's feelings about teaching are closely connected to the student's progress as learners:

Lecturer [7]: There are some things that you perceive as bad which are actually learning experiences. Now, if the student comes out at the end of the course, having recognised that that earlier bad, negative experience was positive, then that's fine. But learning isn't in packets. You can't necessarily do that within a- Certainly I don't think you can deal with it within a three lecture course.

This view suggests an understanding that teaching and learning are interconnected, and that learning is a longitudinal process enacted by, meaningful to, and contingent on the student. In this sense, the teaching-learning relation is neither predictable, nor determinate; the lecturer is not in control of 'learning outcomes' and there is no specific time at which evaluations would produce accurate or holistic information about the lecturer's role in that learning.

Lecturer [4]: I think, maybe it was one of these things that when they were struggling to get the work together it seemed very tough and they weren't sure what they'd learnt, but when they'd got it all together and they were presenting it, somehow they saw the fruits of their labour, and all of a sudden it became worth it. [They filled out the form] a few weeks back when things were- When they'd have been really struggling with the poster, in that way ... So they were probably almost on a low, there. Because it all seemed difficult and "Why?", "What's the point?" But yesterday they'd

got it all organised and they thought "Wow, aren't these good! Did we really write all this?" So maybe that was a timing thing. But that again shows how one has to be cautious of written versus anecdotal evidence. And we don't really know which is- And which do we take on board?

The lecturer has to wait for the students to come to terms with, and make sense of their own learning. Because the teaching-learning relation is longitudinal and indeterminate, it is not possible to take symptomatic expressions of the students' experiences of learning as direct indications of the nature and adequacy of teaching within the teaching-learning relation.

"It's not necessarily a criticism of the teacher": Lecturers took the view that student feedback requires students to make judgements about teaching in relation to their own learning. They felt that in order to do this, the student would have to assess their own progress as learners, and their own feelings about their progress. Yet lecturers felt that the student's understanding of their own progress may be opaque to them. The next lecturer does not imply that this is a *fault* on the student's part but a reflection of the nature of learning and understanding; these are phenomena that are tightly connected and yet *essentially* difficult to recognise, identify and quantify:

Lecturer [2]: I would say I tend to look at it as an assessment of me and how the students think they have understood the course. And clearly the improved [student feedback] assessments there and comments among them imply that they think that I have made the topic easier to understand and to learn. I'm not sure from the examination results that I have seen ... that it has

made an awful lot of difference to what the students know, in certain respects. But they certainly think they know more. The way I read the response is that the students have a better feeling about what they know from that course. But I am not at all convinced it really measures how much they do know or rather how much they have learned. ... I've got no real way of telling that I don't think.

“Opportunities to hit back”: In the light of the above discussion it is possible to understand why the use of student feedback as a summative measure of the lecturer’s performance is experienced by lecturers as a highly contentious issue. It appears illogical and unfair; it sends the wrong signals to students, and flawed messages to those who draw inferences about lecturers’ performance from the data.

This lecturer suggest that because learning takes place within, and is experienced in relation to, educational, personal, social and institutional contexts, students feedback will not just reflect the student’s experience of learning, it will also reflect their experiences of, and feelings about, these varied contexts.

Lecturer [10]: I also think they probably get a feeling of power sometimes. They are not given very many opportunities to hit back. A lot of them are very intimidated in tutorials and they feel as though they can't say anything. And suddenly they are given the opportunity to do something anonymously and in a group, and they get a feeling of power, and sometimes I think it does go to their heads, and they have been quite merciless to some members of staff.

... I guess they reflect on- quite a lot on just their own reactions or perceptions to the subject that

they are studying. So the criticisms of the lecturer might also actually subtly include students just feeling that they haven't coped, that they haven't done enough work, that they don't like the subject, or the way it's being taught. It's not necessarily a criticism of the teacher, it's the only way the student feels that they can express their general frustration I guess.

Conclusion: If learning is the responsibility of the student, if teaching is of only partial and indeterminate impact on the student's learning, and if students' experiences of learning are subjective and contextualised, the teacher-centred focus of student feedback is unjustified and unfair. Lecturers' ideas of the teaching-learning relation are also incompatible with the reductionist and technicist concept of teaching reflected in the SEQ. Moreover, the data generated by a teacher-focused method of student feedback, especially when this is quantitative, is narrow, restricted, decontextualised information that distorts the nature of the teaching-learning relation.

Student feedback must reflect the idea that teaching and learning are relational, and that the relation is a contextualised, subject-contingent, learner-centred, indeterminate and longitudinal process. Student feedback must allow this, if it is to be an expression of the value of processes that obtain 'academic standards'; the maintenance of which is the lecturers' professional responsibility, and their part of the contractual bargain.

5.4. “It becomes statistically insignificant and rather anecdotal”;

validity of ‘voice’ or method?

“The basically nuts and bolts things”: Lecturer 15 spoke of a need to restrict the questions asked on a SEQ to the “nuts and bolts” aspects of teaching. These, he feels, would be legitimate questions, and would generate “proper responses”. He defines ‘a proper response’ against a scientific view of validity; questions that result in the expression of idiosyncratic or “value-led” feelings and preferences are “dangerous” subject matter. This next extract continues that above. He suggests that the student’s experience of teaching and learning involves questions that can be weighted on a sliding scale of objectivity-subjectivity:

Lecturer [15]: And I don't think that there are a lot of overtones about whether [the nuts and bolts] are good or bad, I just think they're essential. And then there are the set of things that relate to the specific course content, and they're not quite so dangerous, but then at the end we've got all the bits like “Have you any other comments?”, or the stuff which is much more reflective. And that is a difficult area, because there are lots of difficulties of interpretation.

He wants to eliminate comments that have no objective, external reference; these would not be available to verification or substantiation. His assumption is that there is a ‘truth’ independent of the student: the external reference is meaningful, independent of the student’s perception. The logic of this view is that the qualities of the student’s perception are simultaneously a problem, and without value; the student’s subjective relationship to, experience of and feelings about that object are not important subject

matter for enquiry.

The idea of “difficulties of interpretation” is double edged. Given his point of view, interpretation of “reflective” data is a *difficulty* because interpretation involves an assessment of information that is itself subjective, and also implicates the subjective reference of the person who interprets the information. Second, interpretation is *difficult* because the information required in order to interpret the data - information concerning the student’s subjective frame of reference - is unavailable.

It is not the case that the lecturer believes that questions asked on the SEQ give comprehensive insight into teaching. The lecturer makes a rational assessment of what is possible to evaluate via a SEQ, given the methodological assumptions and restrictions of this particular method. He feels the SEQ is useful in terms of the “nuts and bolts”; the focus on these renders the SEQ a “device that lets us produce basic ‘value for money’ lectures”.

The SEQ method restricts the range of data that the student might reveal; these are aspects of the teaching-learning relationship which are unavailable to quantification and measurement. Moreover the vagaries of subjective or contextual influence on students’ views are seen as negative biases, rather than potentially meaningful issues to investigate. The lecturer asserts that the SEQ is redundant if “other, better forms of communication” are available. This form of communication constitutes “caring teaching”; ‘caring teaching’ is facilitated by, and a reflection of, interaction between the individual student and the lecturer:

Lecturer [15]: We have to recognise that once we move away from the nuts and bolts things we are moving into a very difficult area. Potentially difficult. That's why I don't like questionnaire a) to have sections which have 'Any other comments?': I think you should have specific, identified questions, and ask them, and you shouldn't go fishing. And secondly, I think all students should be offered the opportunity to ... discuss their problems, if that seemed appropriate. Because you see I think questionnaires are redundant, if you have other, better forms of communication. ... I think with questionnaires the end product should be that the worst of my colleagues at least give effective, worthwhile lectures, even if they are not going to be great. Questionnaires should be the device that lets us produce basic 'value for money' lectures. ... So I think questionnaires can do some things, rather than others. But they are not a substitute for caring teaching.

Paradoxically, therefore, the information needed to alleviate the "difficulties of interpretation" of student feedback data also renders this data redundant.

"it's wrapped up with all of these things": The methodological assumptions of the questionnaire force the view that an objective quantification of teaching, learning and the teaching-learning relation *must* be available. The next lecturer contests this view and feels that data elicited via the SEQ is "uninterpretable" and "valueless":

Lecturer [14]: I think that there are probably a whole host of things in there that the student draws upon, and there are so many things that it probably makes the ratings valueless in the end. ... All of these things, from endogenous factors affecting the individual lecturer and students to the difficulty of the materials, how the student perceives you in terms of social attraction. ... So

there are all these factors, none of which have anything to do with the educational experience of the students in that lecture. And I think student feedback questionnaires are a probably fairly valid assessment of what the educational experience was like, - If students could set aside all these factors. But they can't, so it's wrapped up with all of these things in these questionnaires. By and large they are uninterpretable, there's too much influencing why the single student circles a single option on the scale.

He feels that students rankings do not refer to the actual educational event, but refer to - or are mixed up with - the student's feelings about, and perceptions of, the context for that event. From this point of view, the attributes of the context of the educational event are unimportant. The assumption is that in order for a student to make a valid response, the student has to be able to disentangle all the influences that bear on their educational experience. This implies a concept of 'experience of education' as objective and objectifiable; 'experience' is something other to, or apart from the influences on the student.

These assumptions have three implications for assessments of the validity of SEQ results. First the contextualising information is discounted as bias. Second, the method will be constructed so as to eliminate, as far as possible, such 'bias'. Third, because rankings *inevitably* refer to a wider context, these relations must be established and quantified, or else the rankings will be valueless.

“Some mythical objective scale”: This next lecturer is torn between a scientific concept of validity and his experiential view that “objective quantification” of teaching and learning is problematic:

Lecturer [6]: If you say, “Well what did you actually learn in that class?” It might not be quantifiable in those terms. You are aware that those results don't reflect perhaps the reality, or don't reflect any sort of objective academic criteria or standard. Rather they reflect more the atmosphere of the group. ... It is a worry I have about it. You know how do- How do you actually- Can you get anywhere near an objective quantification of what has actually been taught and learnt and absorbed within a class, or within a course or whatever. Or are you just getting questionnaires back based on very impressionistic, impressionistic experiences of that course?

This next lecturer contrasts two alternative types of data. He makes a similar assumption to Lecturer 6: he differentiates the two types of data by drawing on a scientific view of validity:

Lecturer [4]: I think, although again it becomes rather statistically insignificant and rather anecdotal, often the rather sort of 'off-the-cuff' comments in the corridor or whatever can be the most revealing. But again the risk is that they are only from one or two individuals in an ill-thought out moment. They may be less guarded. They may be a personal view rather than a view that they all think. Or they think, “Well I'll put this on the form because that's what the person next to me put on”, or “That's what the lecturer wants to see”.

He recognises the tension: the information that is most valuable is also the information that, in statistical terms, would not appear important. Although the SEQ results are of use to him when addressing technical or basic issues, the lecturer is unable to arrive at an understanding of aspects of teaching that he considers vital: those “centred on the student”:

Lecturer [4]: [what is useful are] simple comments like, “You can’t be heard at the back”, “Your handouts are good”, “Yours are poor”, “His are better”. They’re relatively easy to act on because again it’s a small circumscribed thing you can look at. You can go, “Well I don’t think his handouts are better”, or “Well I will try to project a bit better”. ... Then you get down to the more subtle things like increasing interest in the course, student learning, and these are all much harder, because they become a lot- They’re stuff that’s harder for me to look at because a lot of those things become more centred on the student. For example, if the course isn’t as interesting as they hoped- Is that because they came into the course with the wrong perceptions, or into the course for the wrong reasons?

The question posed by Lecturer 6, “Can you get anywhere near an objective quantification of what has actually been taught and learnt and absorbed within a class?” originates in the demands of the methodological assumptions of the method in use. The method employed assumes teaching-learning to be objectifiable and quantifiable, and yet no single lecturer was able, with certainty, to define teaching-learning in this way. In contrast, they considered the teaching-learning relation to be complex, indeterminate, ephemeral and intangible.

Lecturer 6 struggles to answer his own question. Both the assumptions of the methodology, the use of the method and the struggles that are generated thereby create considerable confusion, if not also personal insecurity concerning the lecturer's own expertise, about what teaching is: Am I in a position to analyse what teaching should be? You know I don't know what 'it' is (Lecturer 6). Similarly, this next lecturer does not know whether the results reflect his own performance or the students' preferences. He is not able to infer what the aggregated score signals. He understands that this methodology of evaluating teaching implies that 'teaching' is an objective phenomenon. In that case, he explains, student feedback data makes sense only when considered as a reflection of the perceived relative qualities of the "batch of students". This is what students fear:

Lecturer [7]: I came out as a 2 on the negative end, if you see what I mean averaged over across the students. This year I was a 3, so I appeared to have improved, but it may be the students- Just the student relations, interactions whatever were different. Or a different batch of students. You know one year's change could just be a statistical blip either way. If the trend continues next year then I'll believe it much more. ... I mean if it wasn't, if there wasn't an individual thing they would all give exactly the same marks. The fact that they don't all give the same marks says there is a difference between students. So because there's a difference between students, if you change the batch of students completely you may just randomly get a shift up or down on the average because you have a different bunch of students. ... on some sort of mythical objective scale, I think a one year shift, I would like to hope it, it did represent some change. But I would far rather see a trend than just a one year comparison: the messages that can come out of comparisons are valid. But whether or not there is an actual difference- I mean if the message comes out and I perceive that to be accurate, then it reinforces that student feedback.

The one meaningful signal is a product of his own comparative analysis of two sets of data; yet this analysis depends heavily on his own perceptions of what is accurate: the meaning he draws from the data will rest on his original knowledge and assumptions. Thus the feedback data tells him little about his teaching. It is also only interpretable against what he already knows, or when analysed in the light of greater knowledge about students. The information gaps are filled by memories of his own student experience, and initiate questions about students that are shaded with overtones of suspicion:

Lecturer [7]: We weren't sure about how many of the students filling in the questionnaire had been to many of our lectures. ... I think the interpretations were tempered with that concern. ... Trying to relate it to what my colleague said about me seeming more nervous, that was rather odd- I mean my memory of when I was a student, the best lecturers were the ones who were not only clear and you know exciting if you like, but also they were on top of it, they were confident. That's my memory, it may be an inaccurate memory but that's my memory. And so the idea that I could get better and seem more nervous, seems a contradiction. It might not be one but it seems one. And it's not something I've formulated any clear opinion on. I've had ideas about things like sort of, if there's a perceived power relationship then if I'm seeming more nervous then perhaps it's a bit less imposing for the students. I don't know. I mean you know I'm arm waving here, I have absolutely no basis other than that is an idea.

“You’re not getting fulsome answers” and “The numbers aren’t all magic”: Questions, concerning the subjective meaning, to the student, of how the student feels, experiences and relates to the learning event, are judged invalid and not addressed because they are unavailable to quantification and measurement. They are thus devalued as knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, the form of information and the processes through which this might be generated, are also devalued.

Information about both what the student feels, and why, provide explanation of the student’s ranking. The ranking becomes meaningful when set against this contextualising information: it is precisely the sort of information that both students and lecturers feel they need to express and hear:

Student [6]: I think a 1 to 5 basis doesn’t always work ... not saying why you put it as a 2 or why you put it as a 5- You know it doesn’t answer the question if it says, ‘Was it very interesting?’, and you say, ‘No!’. It doesn’t solve any problems because they don’t know why it hasn’t been interesting or they don’t know why you haven’t learnt anything. You do, but they don’t. You know so you’re not helping the situation really.

Lecturer [9]: You can look at these sort of questionnaires that the students complete on courses in 2 ways. You can produce sort of bar charts and things and say- Well you know, if they’re all bouncing up high, you can say, “oh well yes we’re going along all right”. ... Or you can try and analyse them in more detail and say, “Well what’s this question, and how does the answer for this influence what we’re doing?” And sometimes I think if you’re not careful you can get bogged down in that and it doesn’t tell you anything more in the end anyway. I mean you’re trying to

analyse an answer with a very limited amount of information. It's a very limited question and it's a limited answer, and err, so the amount of information you can actually extract from it is limited.

These aren't open questions- You know you're not getting fulsome answers, or asking for them, because you wouldn't have the time to analyse them anyway.

Student [3]: You are just making a specific judgement on these people by circling *a number* and it's a bit too, it's a bit too divorced from anything else, because you don't sort of write down, justify why you've circled that number so much really. ... It's not quite so black and white like that. It's not just like, "You're crap", it's more you think, "I didn't find this particularly useful because", and it is more constructive then.

Lecturer [2]: I certainly wouldn't just receive a set of responses and say "They are a waste of time" and throw them in the bin. Which if I thought they weren't valid I might as well do. ... I think, although the numbers have some thing to them, I'm not sure that I believe in quantitative evaluation really. I mean it's probably- It's got some validity in the sense that marking exams has got some validity. You know, you can assign some kind of mark for them. But how much? You know- The numbers aren't all magic.

Both students and lecturers recognise that *in order to interpret* the results of the SEQ, the lecturer requires information that the methodological assumptions and constraints of method eliminate: "it's a bit too divorced from anything else" The results of student feedback are difficult to interpret and assess because the information provided is inadequate and narrow, depersonalised and decontextualised: "the numbers aren't all magic". The SEQ is used because it demands minimal time and administrative

resources; however this means that it does not ask for, or generate “fulsome answers”.

Spending greater amounts of time in analysis of the results would not be revealing: “it doesn’t answer the question”. The lecturer is left “simply arm waving here”.

5.5 Conclusion

Lecturers’ problems with student feedback are a response to a situation in which they experience confusion, insecurity and doubt. In many ways, controversy about student feedback is an expression of the low utility of the data generated. This problem is reinforced by a paradox. The information required to make sense of the data is missing - it has been eliminated, or identified and discounted as ‘bias’. Whether or not lecturers were aware of, or had made sense of their problems in this way, student feedback data from the SEQ was found meaningless: it is inadequate and narrow, decontextualised and depersonalised.

The SEQ gathers students’ views on the effectiveness of a lecturer’s teaching using tick boxes or statistical rankings. It translates the qualitative complexities of a contextualised, longitudinal and indeterminate process into discrete categories and quantities. The concept of ‘academic standards’ translates as the product of these discrete categories of activity and their impact on the student ‘input’: the attributes of the end output graduate are assumed directly related to both the lecturer’s classroom teaching, and the fit between this and the specific content.

The SEQ method of student feedback entails a restriction on the aspects of teaching and learning on which students might 'legitimately' comment. In this context, the information the lecturer receives is partial and narrow. It also reflects and promotes a concept of teaching as a generic set of techniques that produce 'learning outcomes', irrespective of the nature and demands of both subject and student. Lecturers contest the idea that they are such magician performers; likewise, they contest the idea that aggregated statistical measures of their performances are 'magical' reflections of either their role and impact within the teaching-learning relation.

In the view of lecturers, the idea that the teaching-learning relation involves "nuts and bolts" (Lecturer 15) of "objective" (Lecturer 6) teaching makes sense only in terms of "creating the environment" (Lecturer 13) in which students might fruitfully engage in their own task: that of learning. The lecturer is involved in a "partnership" (Lecturer 16) with the student; the "nuts and bolts" are only a marginal and basic part of that contract. The educational contract renders the student responsible for learning; the lecturer's responsibilities involve an obligation to seek and reflect on information concerning the complexities of the teaching-learning relation, the demands of the subject-discipline, and the student's engagement with the wider contexts and opportunities of a higher education. This process is deliberative and negotiated; it also requires communicative relations that obtain a "higher level of feedback" than that provided by the SEQ:

Lecturer [4]: I think although again it becomes rather statistically insignificant and rather anecdotal, often the rather sort of off the cuff comments in the corridor or whatever can be the most revealing. ... I think that to a large degree, you only start to get the higher level, a higher

level of feedback when the students and yourself have a good rapport at any level.

Lecturers' perceptions of both the demands and goals of this qualitative, negotiated, and deliberative process represent their interpretations of, and approaches to, a professional obligation to maintain academic, educational and graduate standards.

The 'student-[as-product]-as-customer': A discourse common to lecturers' views, that conjures an homogeneous and stereotypical image of the student as lazy, instrumental and change resistant, is used to legitimate a level of resistance to the imperatives of student feedback. The negative discourse is, in part, a reflection of the frustration of the unproductive burden of student feedback; it is, in part a product of the agenda in which student feedback is embedded; and, in part, a dynamic in contesting interpretations and representations of the 'student's role and identity.

In order to infer meaning in student feedback data, the lecturer is forced to infer the reasons for students' rankings. To do this, the lecturer has to draw on existing assumptions and beliefs about students' motives, attitudes and disposition.

Stereotypical ideas of the lazy student conflate with the pejorative discourse surrounding the idea of the 'student-[as-product]-as-customer' and serve to discredit the validity and integrity of the 'voice' that the data represents.

The validity of the student's voice is contested on political, educational, academic and professional grounds. The validity of the student's 'voice' is also questionable from a

methodological perspective. That student feedback generates data of doubtful validity is a problem that inheres in the methodological assumptions of the method encountered most often by students and lecturers. The SEQ method undermines many of the rhetorical objectives of the policy agenda that inspires it, at the same time as it is compatible with the ontological, epistemological and political assumptions and interests implicit to that agenda. It acts to *disempower* the student, and leaves the lecturer 'arm-waving'.

SECTION TWO: CHAPTER SIX

The appraisal, control or development of professional practice in teaching?

You laugh; laugh then gentlemen, but answer me this: can a man's interests be correctly calculated? Are there not some which not only have not been classified, but are incapable of classification? ... You will say ... that even now man, although he has learnt to see more clearly than in the days of barbarism, is still far from having grown accustomed to acting as reason and science direct. But all the same you are quite sure that he will inevitably acquire the habit, when certain old habits have altogether passed away, and common sense and science have completely re-educated and normally direct human nature. ... Furthermore, you say, science will teach men that they have not, in fact, and never have had, either will or fancy, and are not more than a sort of piano keyboard or barrel-organ cylinder; and that the laws of nature still exist on the earth, so that whatever man does he does not of his own volition, but, as really goes without saying, by the laws of nature. Consequently, these laws of nature have only to be discovered, and man will no longer be responsible for his actions, and it will become extremely easy for him to live his life. All human actions, of course, will then have to be worked out by those laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms, and entered in the almanac; or better still there will appear orthodox publications, something

like our encyclopaedic dictionaries, in which everything will be so accurately calculated and plotted that there will no longer be any individual deeds or adventures left in the world. ... all problems will vanish in the twinkling of an eye, simply because all possible answers to them will have been supplied. ... Of course, it is quite impossible ... to guarantee that it won't be terribly boring then (because what can one do if everything has been plotted out and tabulated?), but on the other hand, everything will be eminently sensible. Of course, boredom leads to every sort of ingenuity ... it is indeed possible, and sometimes positively imperative (in my view), to act directly contrary to one's own best interests

(Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground; p.30-33).

Introduction

This chapter considers student feedback's role in the development of lecturers' professional practice as teachers in higher education.

First, by reference to recent policy and national/popular texts concerning the role of student feedback in the development of professional practice in teaching in higher education, I argue that the agenda for student feedback is both ambiguous and internally contradictory. Student feedback is contextualised by the dominant goal within this agenda: control and judgement. The ends of defining and measuring levels of staff performance predicate a technicist, competence-based concept of professional

development in teaching in higher education; the means suited to the ends of judgement and control, and to a competence-based concept of professional development, are evaluation practices that enable quantitative and summative assessments of performance. Both means and ends reflect, and facilitate, the technical rational framework of government policy. Staff development texts produced by national agencies reflect the demands and assumptions of a technicist, competence-based model of professional practice in teaching in higher education. These, and more popular literatures and debates within the higher education field, frame ideas of professional practice, professional development, and evaluation in terms compatible with the technical-rational framework, and in terms conducive to the agenda of control and judgement. In a context where a bureaucratic and technical-rational framework for performance appraisal and accountability creates managerial imperatives for a standardised, quantitative, summative means of gathering students' views, the SEQ is a useful tool. However the SEQ predicates a standard definition of 'good teaching' and thus obviates the professional's privilege and responsibility for continual questioning of the substance of their practice: the questions of what constitutes 'good teaching' and how might they evaluate and improve their efforts in teaching.

Second, I argue that students and lecturers perceive student feedback as a form of summative performance appraisal. In Chapter 5 I argued that lecturers' awareness of the policy context of student feedback encouraged a concept of student feedback *as* the SEQ methodology, and that this both implied and encouraged a technicist concept of professional practice. In Chapter 3 I argued that lecturers conceptualised student feedback in terms of observation, scrutiny and threat. Chapter 1 showed that lecturers

associated the concept of student feedback with, and viewed it as shaped by, the policy context for higher education. Here I argue that lecturers' awareness of these aspects of student feedback role stand in tension with their idea that student feedback has assumed formative functions. The use of methods of student feedback, that are conducive to managerial and external appraisals, conflicts with its intended formative aims: the SEQ stimulates defensiveness, demotivation, and complacency.

Third, I outline alternative concepts of professional development. In this case, both evaluation and development are conceptualised in terms of an idea of professional practice that contrasts with the assumptions of the technical-rational, competence-based model. Professional practice is considered as essentially deliberative and reflective; it is constituted by the professional's commitment to continual appraisal and questioning of judgements, of appropriate actions, and of required knowledge and skills. Professional practice is a process of learning; evaluation should aim to mirror, accentuate and enable this learning process.

Fourth, I argue that students and lecturers identify the SEQ approach to student feedback as lacking in both information and process value. The information students want to give and lecturers' require is found contingent on the process of eliciting feedback. It follows that the *process* of student feedback is essential to the *productivity* of the practice.

In conclusion I argue that the dominant method of student feedback experienced by both students and lecturers introduces a form of evaluation that generates fear, damaged

relations, mistrust, and self-doubt. It is disempowering and unproductive, and reflects and reproduces conditions for evaluation that contradict rhetorical claims that student feedback leads to the enhancement of professional practice. Lecturers and students argue for evaluation that takes place as a shared, qualitative, and interactive *process*. This is beneficial at the same time as it both obviates the threat of performance appraisal, and renders the SEQ redundant.

6.1. Assessment, Control or Development?: the Role of Student

Feedback

Control: The 1991 White Paper uses the concept 'quality' to assert the need for external assessments of teaching within higher education. Assessment, of both teaching and the procedures that ground teaching activities, is a means of external judgement and control. Control is achieved by linking judgements to penalties:

The preceding paragraphs have considered quality control mechanisms for teaching within institutions, and audit arrangements to ensure that provision is at or beyond a satisfactory level of quality. To complement these, arrangements are needed to assess the quality of what is actually provided. While recognising that the precise arrangements will be a matter for the Funding Councils themselves, the Government considers it important that assessment of quality should continue to inform the funding decisions of the new Funding Councils (DES 1991:28-9; my emphases).

Yet at the same time, 'quality' is also used to assert an institutional responsibility to control the status quo, *and* seek improvements:

The prime responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning rests with each individual institution. At the same time, there is a need for proper accountability for the substantial public funds invested in higher education. (DES 1991:24; my emphases).

Control of both the status quo, and improvements, is the responsibility of the institution. Yet external evaluations constitute external controls; these provide for 'proper' accountability.

'Quality', as a concept of control, implies a need for defined standards such that these can be monitored and evaluated both externally and internally. Defining and definitive codes and guidelines about standards are required in order to derive judgements about deviations from set standards and levels of improvement. Within the institution, control is exerted through procedures and techniques of observation:

Some universities have now articulated the standards expected of staff in their teaching through the production of codes and guidelines, and are designing, and testing or using a variety of means to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching. Evaluation methods include the use of performance indicators, observation, use of student feedback and use of teaching portfolios. (HEQC 1994b:xv).

In the above extract, student feedback is associated with the control of the status quo. In this next extract it is an activity assumed compatible with the developmental nature of a 'quality culture':

Systems and arrangements for quality assurance: development of a quality culture.

Audit teams noted many examples of a quality culture in different kinds of universities. These examples captured a range of features including: ... 15.5 communication and liaison across the university, an emphasis on obtaining feedback from a broad range of constituencies and a clear commitment to identifying and spreading good practice (HEQC 1994b:5; my emphases).

In this final extract 'quality' is a relative concept: 'good quality' reflects the proper arrangement and functioning of procedural and technical control mechanisms. Procedural and technical mechanisms are effective when applied to, rather than incorporated as an integral part of practice:

A number of common features are now observable in the quality assurance arrangements of all, or nearly all, institutions. It is, for example, no longer a matter to be particularly remarked upon that institutions have extensive formal systems to assure the quality of their education. That is now the general rule, not the exception. And even where this is not the case, there is an increasing acknowledgement that some degree of formality to complement an otherwise informal approach may be necessary and can bring benefits. Given this welcome development, it may seem perverse to

suggest that formal systems are in themselves not a sufficient response to the challenges facing good quality, and that they may in some cases actually be deceptively ineffective. It is always dangerous to assume that the mere existence of formal procedures or systems will *per se* guarantee or assure quality, since quality is about practice as well as procedures (HEQC 1996b:1; my emphasis).

The extract is ambiguous: whilst arguing that procedures alone are insufficient controls, the practice upon which 'quality' is contingent is not teaching/research but the application of procedures to teaching and research.

Control and standards; defining teaching: The idea, that standards of teaching can be controlled through the application of procedures and techniques, assumes and necessitates precise specifications of both the procedures and teaching; there should be a tight fit and correlation between procedures and techniques and the object to which they are applied. However this idea further assumes both that teaching might be defined in this way, and that the maintenance and enhancement (control) of standards can be secured through the application of procedures and techniques. Moreover it assumes that the application of procedures and techniques is the optimal means of achieving (controlled) maintenance and enhancement.

The creation of these forms of internal/managerial and external controls implies the necessity to arrive at generic definitions and standards of teaching. Owing to this it is not the lecturer who is mandated with the responsibility and privilege to construe the

problem of what teaching is and how it might be evaluated and enhanced. Rather, this is the privilege and responsibility of external 'expert authorities' whose judgements inform the standards and criteria used within external assessments or within institutions.

The first two of the extracts that follow, are taken from literature produced by national staff development agencies; the audience for this literature are the external quality assessors. The initial extract is one example of how assessments of 'quality' assume 'norms' of teaching:

The various methods of teaching may be placed on a continuum. ... There are some features of teaching on which there is both a consensus among lecturers and evidence from studies of student learning. Generally speaking, effective teaching is systematic, stimulating and caring. It ... leads to successful learning (UCoSDA 1996:12).

The next extract is motivated by a perceived need for a 'coherent' and 'comprehensive' approach to staff development and its management. The drive for universal applicability in staff development practices both assumes the availability of generic definitions of effective teaching and seeks to promote these as a baseline. The criteria reflect 'traditional' practices - they represent the status quo; it will be necessary to re-train staff once new definitions have been identified by an external party:

Formulation of new, 'bespoke' criteria for teaching. A new range of criteria by which an academic's teaching activity might be evaluated and judged could be

drawn. ... In some ways it is a rather traditional list, but that is deliberate, since at present most teaching is rather traditional. New developments in staff training for active learning [Cryer (ed.), 1992] will, we hope, make it soon necessary to update it, particularly in the light of the very helpful recent HERDSA checklist (USDU 1994:29).

The third extract is taken from 'popular' literature concerned with teaching and learning in higher education. The extract is taken from a chapter concerned with evaluation. Here, it is not only assumed, but forcefully argued, that teaching might be defined. Moreover it is asserted that those who contest the view that teaching is *not* available to definition - and thereby measurement - merely reveal their own wish to evade scrutiny, or their inexpert, inadequate grasp of the disciplinary field of teaching and learning in higher education. The extract not only reflects how external needs for generic definitions of teaching render the lecturer redundant from the process of defining the problem of teaching. It also *reinforces* the assumption that lecturers cannot be trusted with the responsibility for maintaining and enhancing standards because they are incompetent; an assumption that legitimates the perceived need for control mechanisms, and is entangled within the rhetoric of the purposes of 'proper' accountability. Whilst this extract serves to disempower the lecturer by the assertion that the lecturer lacks sufficient skills in the field of teaching and learning, the extract also reflects the assumptions and agenda of the contemporary context. It is in this context that the perspective that the literature adopts has become popular:

There is a widely held myth that teaching quality is a many-sided, elusive and ultimately indefinable phenomenon. The dogma ... orthodoxy ... myth that university teaching is so idiosyncratic a matter that its nature cannot be defined may be a mistaken one, but it serves a useful function. If a function cannot be specified, it is easier to resist pressures to judge whether it is being adequately performed. Stripped down, this argument against measuring teaching is based on little more than the idea that you cannot hit a moving target. It is about as reasonable. ... we can see that it rests on a convenient misunderstanding, based on lack of background knowledge, about teaching and learning in higher education. We know what good university teaching is. ... In summary, there are degrees of freedom in good teaching; but it exists, nevertheless (Ramsden 1992:220-1).

This final extract is an example of research into the SEQ. It argues, in contrast, that teaching *is* 'mysterious'. Yet the author interprets this mystery as motivation for research into the components and relations of teaching. His perspective is no different to that of Ramsden; he assumes that at some point a definition of teaching might be arrived at, catalogued, calculated and plotted. Only then might lecturers and students engage in the evaluation of teaching with any degree of validity. The assumption is that the 'common sense' knowledge held by the lay lecturer is an obstruction. In contrast to an approach to professional development that would start from and focus on the perspectives and assumptions of the practitioner, the view here is that 'common sense' knowledge is of no value and should be rejected in favour of that provided by the experts. The lecturer should retrain in terms of this expert knowledge:

students' evaluation of teaching is based on the premise that students (and teachers) are able to recognise good teaching when they see it. This in turn is based on the belief that teaching is a self-evident activity, and I believe that it is this belief, more than any other, which hinders progress in teaching. Until learning and teaching are seen as being similar to astronomy or zoology in that all of these disciplines investigate mysterious phenomena, and hence require the jettisoning of much common sense knowledge, no progress will be made in improving teaching (Sotto 1998:29; emphasis in the original).

According to Fish (1991:27-8) an approach to evaluation that demonstrates an 'emphasis ... on pre-determined technical skills, logical procedures, and permanent and easily quantifiable propositional knowledge' is the hallmark of a technical-rational model of professional practice:

This model assumes that professional activity is a matter of technical performance following a logical sequence as part of an efficient system. This values the technical aspects of the professional's work (measurable skills, performance and procedures that can be mastered) and logical systems and efficiency, [and] comfortably accommodates the now conventional concepts of quality assurance derived from industry. ... [It] views theory (propositional knowledge) as something which is applied to practice (procedural knowledge). The model sees research operating in the scientific paradigm. It is concerned with collecting empirical evidence which provides proof. It strives for objectivity in these processes and seeks to remove, as far as possible, human fallibility.

Whilst Ramsden asserts an essential 'truth' about the nature of teaching, his perspective is also contextualised by an approach to performance appraisal where such an assertion fits happily. Whilst Sotro is concerned with the identification of criteria of effective teaching that might be verified according to a scientific paradigm, his view also finds purchase with the assumptions that underpin contemporary approaches to quality assurance. Their respective claims about the substance of professional practice in teaching (the nature of teaching-learning) also predicates a singular conceptualisation of competent professional practice (what it is to teach), and a singular conceptualisation of the means by which competence might be evidenced (demonstrated) and developed (learnt). Furthermore, the task of evidencing competence is divorced from the task of developing competence.

6.2. Threats, defensiveness and divisiveness. Blandness and complacency.

Measuring performance: In Chapter 5 I described how a concern to generate criteria of good teaching on which students might comment with high degrees of objectivity reflected the methodological constraints of the SEQ form of student feedback. I also argued that the assumptions of the SEQ, and its use, predicate a technicist concept of the teaching-learning relation: that this is a sequence of component parts. The use of the SEQ forces a reductionist concept of education; evaluations are reduced to an investigation of what might be measured. This was illustrated by reference to the views of Lecturer 15:

Lecturer [15] The basically nuts and bolts things ... a series of common things ... I don't believe that they are heavily value led in most cases. I think you can get proper responses ... If there were continuous spectrum of questions in questionnaires, which run from the nuts and bolts through to the philosophical, then probably the interpretations in the nuts and bolts end are not a problem. The problems develop as you move on and on and on to things that are much less capable of objective assessment.

Threats: His concern to assert parameters for questions that produce 'proper' responses can also be considered as a response to use of the SEQ as a form of summative performance appraisal. Whilst he supports the use of a questionnaire as a "neat summary of teaching", his enthusiasm is tempered by the difficulty of establishing valid criteria. It

is, he feels, essential to ensure that students' dislike for a particular subject will not be reflected in their feedback. This would mean that the results used to appraise, judge and compare his performance would be unfairly biased:

Lecturer [15]: ... appraisal can be difficult.

Rachel: Is it considered an appraisal?

Lecturer [15]: I think so, and I think it is because in most departments it's made quite clear that when they come to look at promotion, questionnaire responses will inform the view of your teaching. ... It's a neat and easy way of summarising someone's teaching, which is very difficult to summarise in any other way.

Rachel: Is that why the forms have taken off in such a big way in the last few years?

Lecturer [15]: No I think that that's quality audit. But I think that also it is one way, certainly since the new promotion procedures came in a year ago, of trying to evaluate, because student feedback is one way of judging how good the individual's teaching is. I think it could be a very dangerous way, especially for people who are teaching in unpopular areas. I mean I'm never worried, particularly, but I teach in 2 hellish areas. ... I mean I think the good Lord himself would have difficulty getting a profusion of good questionnaire returns in some of the areas.

His concern centres on the idea that these results will send an inaccurate signal to those who appraise his teaching, or consider teaching within applications for promotion. His tempered enthusiasm for the questionnaire is bolstered by the idea that student feedback is a developmental activity. Yet lecturers' motivations are negative. Their motivations to work on their teaching reflect the way in which they have interpreted the questions raised about lecturers' professionalism in teaching: the question is to avoid bad marks,

rather than to teach well (according to their own, disciplinary or academic standards).

Alternatively lecturers attempt to avoid bad scores rather than *want* to teach well.

Attention to student feedback is a tactic to avoid managerial sanction and remedial action. Finally, 'development' is *conceptualised as* remedial action:

Lecturer [15]: The process of questionnaires has made all of us who are delivering teaching and are responsible for learning, think much more careful about what we do. Whatever the answers to the questionnaires, all but the most immoral of us have had to think hard about what we are doing, and how we do it. And that has got to be good. And in a way it's been a time grabber because people who's energy has been much directed towards research have in a way been almost forced to do something about their teaching and learning, or they run the risk of getting poor questionnaire returns. ... I mean I think one thing that is important to remember is that this has been useful in the extreme cases, of identifying teachers who are clearly not up to the job. I mean it, I know it has identified a number very clearly. And whatever the theory, if people are that bad, this is one mechanism by which this is revealed, and it then becomes possible to try and help these people.

His own university policy states that the 'principles underlying the recommended procedures below are that: student feedback should occur, be seen to occur and should have an effect which is recorded'. It has become 'University policy to encourage the use of student questionnaires to collect feedback'. The university's policy states that the 'appropriate member of staff should be involved in analysis but should not be the only person to see results of feedback'; that there are 'other members of staff who will find it helpful to see results [including] the Head of Department'; and that 'results of

questionnaires can be helpful in the staff review process and in supplying information on teaching abilities for promotion purposes'. The ability to teach is considered a measurable and relative attribute; lecturers' performances might be demonstrated on a league table: 'Some departments publish a 'top five lecturers' list annually as a result of questionnaires, which is popular with students and rewarding for the staff involved'.

The developmental objective of student feedback is integrated into university policy through an hierarchical management system. The results of student feedback are to be used by others for the purposes of comparison and comparative judgement. Student feedback is conceptualised in terms of a structure of procedures, techniques, and signals to others concerning the lecturer's past performance.

This approach to the integration of developmental objectives and this conceptualisation of student feedback is also reflected in other lecturers' descriptions of the purposes of student feedback. The following extract follows an initial discussion of the lecturer's personal use of questionnaire results to identify areas for improvement. He then downplays the idea that student feedback might be used for comparative and judgmental purposes; yet at the same time he emphasises that within departmental discussions of feedback results, greater attention is given to "poor" results. He also suggests that despite the lack of formal procedures, the results of student feedback may inevitably inform and enable judgement by others for both formal and informal purposes:

Lecturer [2]: At the moment it will be formally discussed, albeit briefly perhaps, at the teaching committee of the department. The elements that will be discussed in more detail will mainly be

those that are seen as being poor, for some reason. ... Although we do get numbers back, there is no formal ranking comparison made. ... There's certainly nothing implied in this department of sort of saying, "Oh so and so is a better teacher than somebody else". Although of course you could ask people for a recommendation of somebody who is a teacher and they'd pick somebody out. And no doubt they've sort of partly picked up that at least from what they've seen of the scores, but it is not done in any formal sense. ... I understand from the more extreme cases where they've done really quite badly, that there have been rather more intensive discussions between the head of teaching and the person concerned. And through the appraisal system which the department operates possibly between the appraiser and the person concerned. Or ultimately between the Head of Department and the person concerned because the Head of Department interviews everybody after their appraisal, based on the appraisal report.

The ramifications of hierarchical, managerial, public and comparative approaches to the evaluation and development of professional practice are that student feedback becomes a threatening activity with potentially damaging effects. Lecturer 15 describes how lecturers' responses to negative feedback might contradict the developmental aims of student feedback:

Lecturer [15]: ... it then becomes possible to try and help these people. That then becomes a much more complicated proposition, because if these people are weak and uncertain teachers, then a real hammering from the content of the questionnaire returns, may be counter-productive, it may not lead to an enormous improvement. ... The very bad ones can be destroyed even more.

In contrast to a concept of professional development which demands that a lecturer learns to recognise and confront his or her own weaknesses (Argyris and Schoen 1978), the implication of the centrally devised and controlled questionnaire is that the lecturer is not the agent of (self)evaluation.

Defensiveness: Students' identify that student feedback is designed to 'help' the lecturer:

Rachel: What are they for, do you think, these forms?

Student [6]: To help the lecturers hopefully [laugh] in structuring their courses, or the course organisers.

Rachel: Do you think that they do?

Student [6]: I don't know. I think that the ones that are good course organisers, course lecturers do. But unfortunately the ones that aren't don't. But usually what you find is that people who aren't very good lecturers don't give them out unfortunately. Because usually the ones that have more participation are the people who are doing it right. Unfortunately the people who aren't, don't, and therefore don't get much better and therefore from year to year the courses aren't good, or don't get any better anyway.

Her impression of the impact of student feedback is that, "weak and uncertain teachers" are unlikely to use the SEQ method to inform their own teaching. Yet she does not describe "good lecturers" as those who simply do use the SEQ; good lecturers are those who "have more participation". Similarly "people who aren't very good" are also those who

are not "very participative"

Students recognise that the summative and judgmental nature of student feedback make it a potentially threatening activity for lecturers:

Student [3]: I can understand that the lecturers might feel a bit exposed, which is why I don't like filling them out particularly.

Rachel: Have you done an evaluation in [subject]?

Student [4]: No, I don't think he'd want us to (laugh).

Rachel: No?

Student [4]: He doesn't speak very good English, he doesn't get himself across very well, you couldn't hear him properly in the lectures, and you couldn't understand- I think he'd be too distraught if he did one of those.

The idea that student feedback is threatening provides an explanation for lecturers' lack of action on student feedback. Lecturers are not only in a position to dismiss the value of the feedback by alleging lack of 'objectivity'; lecturers may have reasonable motivation to act in self-defence and close themselves off from criticism:

Student [6]: You don't know what they do with them or how much they accept the information that's on it. You know.

Rachel: You think that they might choose to disregard it or that they might not believe it or-

Student [6]: Yes. If they don't agree with what's being said or they think that the student's

being over sensitive about something, or is trying to have a dig when the student doesn't mean it then they ignore it then, you know. If some people don't like what they hear then they'll cut it out rather than trying to deal with what they've heard.

In Chapter 4 I argued that students find the requirement to criticise lecturers a problematic, risky and ethical dilemma. This next lecturer recognises students' dilemmas in giving student feedback:

Lecturer [6] I think that students are frightened of saying what they really think to lecturers as well, in case it reflects badly then on how the lecturer treats them. You know, if it then gets translated into bad marks, for a course or whatever. There are all sorts of fears going on on both sides I think, which creates a barrier between students and lecturers. And then there's not just the fear element, there's the element I said before of not wanting to be nasty to people. It happens in your own personal life all the time. There are things you want to say to somebody and you don't because you know it'll upset them, or hurt them or you know, so you avoid it. And I think the same goes for lecturers and the students as well.

Students also recognise that lecturers find criticism problematic; their interpretations of lecturers' responses are plausible reasonings about human reactions to criticism. The lecturer identifies reasons for lecturers' responses to negative feedback that echo those of the students. He describes how dismissing the validity of students' feedback, reflects a human tendency to ignore or avoid negative criticism; finding grounds to reject student feedback is an act of self-defence.

The lecturer refers to a pile of completed evaluation questionnaires on his desk, and begins to flick through them:

Lecturer [6]: I think lecturers are actually frightened of finding out what students really think of the courses in many ways. You want just to hear the good news, or if there's no any good news then "I won't hear it at all, thank you very much". And I think the temptation (laugh) is to think- Because I get you know 4,5,4,5,4,5, I tend to think they're very valid, you know "Oh yeah, this is wonderful". Then 10 [forms] in there's a couple of 3s there, which is only satisfactory. And you think, "Oh well it's not representative, the rest all think I'm good".

He realises that when the validity of students' feedback is questioned, the act of self defence backfires on the student:

Lecturer [6]: If I were only getting all 3s and 2s I might be worried. I might question how valid it is then. If it's a good result then it's valid, if it's not then it's not. If you get bad marks on the questionnaire then, they're obviously not getting hold of the right end of the stick. There are certain people who get, regularly get bad marks on the questionnaires, and they explain it away by saying "It's because there's a problem with the students". ...

Rachel: Do you think people are threatened, teachers are threatened by the results of the questionnaires?

Lecturer [6]: Hmm yes yes, I think so. I think you can see that by the way that there are some people who conveniently forget to hand them out at the end of a course. And then have to do it sort of retrospectively, knowing that it won't then be a representative sample. All sorts of fun and games go on like that. And I think people do find it quite threatening.

Lecturers and students' responses to student feedback are attempts to mediate the threat and damage of negative criticism. This lecturer describes how a questionnaire produced by a staff/student committee is 'bland', because both students and lecturers anticipate and attempt to neutralise the impact of criticism:

Lecturer [9]: The questions were devised by the student/staff committee, and I think they are the blindest questions (laugh) you can possibly hope to see. I mean they really don't tell you very much at all, apart from the fact that, "Does the lecturer speak clearly?" ...

Rachel: Do students ever give written comments, unprompted?

Lecturer [9]: No very rarely. ... I think students are still wary at putting down these sort of personal comments. This is one of the reasons why our staff/student committee came up with this sort of questionnaire is that it isn't threatening to either the students or the staff (chuckle). Which is why it's so bland.

Rachel: What do you mean 'threatening'?

Lecturer [9]: Well, there's been no problem about this here ... but I was involved in introducing a similar sort of questionnaire at [university], and there was a lot of opposition from staff. And I've been to other places where they've had these questionnaires, but they're confidential. Confidential to the academic concerned and the Head of Department. I'm quite amazed at that.

He suggests that lecturers experience the urge to retain student feedback results as private information. This view is supported by the next lecturer. She explains that a process of evaluation that produces self-defensive self-protection is a paradox. If a lecturer is insecure, it is because they feel self-consciously aware of their need for professional development. If they secrete negative feedback it is because they anticipate

that the information might confirm their own suspicions. She also suggests that because both the results, and the question of making the results public are contentious issues, the results are not revealed to students:

Lecturer [10]: The formal student feedback that we have is not involving anything of us feeding back to the students. And that's because there have been a lot of objections to that from members of staff who regard the student forms as completely confidential and they say that it would be a breach of confidence to ever publish any results from these forms. ...

Rachel: Do you mean that they feel the information is confidential to the student or to themselves?

Lecturer [10]: Both. They say that the student has written the form, based on an understanding that it is a confidential 2 way process between the individual student and the individual staff member and it is not for any body else's eyes. I'm not sure that that is based on any real discussion of the student's understanding, that's the assumption that they make. But on the whole the people who most object to doing anything with student feedback are the teachers who over a long period of time the students have always identified as being not very good teachers.

The dynamic towards secreting student feedback results stands in tension with the ideas that student feedback achieves 'proper' accountability and renders the 'private pursuit' of teaching available to public scrutiny. Moreover the motivation behind attempts to forestall disclosure of student feedback results are a desire to ensure that the results are concealed from those who might instigate formal remedial action or deny promotion. This also implies that the lecturer is unlikely to reveal to others a need for development, or to seek assistance through collaboration with peers, or from more formal channels.

Divisiveness: The idea that student feedback is a form of appraisal posits the student in the position of the appraiser. Lecturer 15 suggests that the SEQ is a highly divisive activity: students and lecturers are positioned in opposing roles and litigious relationships.

Lecturer [15]: I think that we have to recognise that we are all on the same side. And questionnaires do produce an appraiser and an appraised, and that creates straight away, I think, a division. ... Now in any other walk of life - and this is a crunch point about questionnaires - in any other walk of life, any accusation of any seriousness, natural justice demands that the accuser actually faces the person he or she is accusing, and says, 'You have been derelict, criminal, immoral, whatever'. And with questionnaires this doesn't happen, and that is a major difficulty in my view about some of the adverse comments. I have colleagues who were accused of things like, 'This lecturer has clearly not opened his notes since you know 1927', or things like that. In many of these cases the lecturers will say, 'If you look at last year's lectures, you will find that they are totally different this year, and I have actually changed them to meet students' complaints last year. But the member of staff doesn't have that opportunity, because these are anonymous comments, and so there's a very real difficulty. Now they're only a fraction of the returns, but they could, if we are not careful, make staff very unsympathetic and very nervous, and a lot of staff are very nervous about questionnaires received.

Because students and lecturers are separated and disengaged throughout the process of generating and interpreting results, communicative activity is one-sided.

Communication is reduced to an anonymous and broken chain of accusation and counter-accusation.

He feels that the SEQ method induces cruel banalities from students; anonymity is counter-productive. Anonymity renders student feedback 'safe', and is motivated by the hope that students will feel more able to express themselves. Students felt that anonymity renders student feedback less meaningful - they react derisively because they would rather "go about it in some other way" (Student 3). Yet lecturers interpreted students' reactions to anonymous questionnaires as advantageous: students take liberties with anonymity and use the opportunity to "hit back" (Lecturer 10).

The SEQ is divisive because it generates a level of bad-faith tinged with nervous anxiety on the part of the lecturer, and because the lack of mutual engagement during the questionnaire process gives rise to insecurity and mistrust between students and lecturers. Dealing with feedback that is likely to contain damaging comment is a paradox: the information will lack integrity yet should be taken seriously; it is only when the lecturer does take the feedback seriously that he or she will be hurt.

Lecturer [4]: I remember altering something one year in response to student feedback, and I did it in an ill-thought out tantrum. And it wasn't a good idea. But you live and learn. Equally the students lived and learned because again it worked both ways. They realised that what they had said probably wasn't as constructive as it could have been.

Rachel: So you were hurt by the comments?

Lecturer [4]: Oh definitely yes. If they're very sort of, almost offensive or whatever, yes they can be. If you are genuinely reading them, yes they can be. Again I've probably got a thicker skin as I've gone on, because you gradually realise that it ends up as a very small percentage who make direct criticisms.

Student feedback need not be a negative process of destructive criticism and allegation. This next lecturer rejects the SEQ in favour of a form of group discussion. In discussion, feedback is more balanced; both parties have the opportunity to ask for clarification of the other's views just as the students will cross-question each other. In a social context, social forces apply. Rather than limiting the information the students are prepared to give, the feedback is more meaningful both because students draw on and are inspired by each other's views, and because the social pressures force levels of honesty. This is information on which the lecturer can rely:

Lecturer [16]: Our discourse approach helps because if someone stands up and says, "I have to tell you I thought it was terrible", then I think someone will say, "You missed half of it, you only came in for one lecture", or whatever reasons. And so you can get an immediate correction and balance of opinion from response from the others. When it's the vociferous one, which is always a worry - the vociferous minority that's always correct when everybody else is wrong - you overcome that. ... And sometimes the written version of the verbal conversation can strike the student quite forcefully ... the intonation-interpretation elements cast a difference, or brought a different meaning out overall. So the students can say, "I wasn't too sure whether that's what I wanted". So yes I think there are 2 chances to correct the *biased* opinion if you like, and this gives a better judgement, a sounder judgement.

Moreover, a discussion based form of feedback transforms the idea of judgement and criticism into one of qualitative comment. This means that student feedback becomes an opportunity to collect positive views; in an appraisal, the lecturer can then be bolstered and motivated by hearing this good news from the appraiser:

Lecturer [16]: With the discourse ... we're focusing in on the areas where there is concern, or praise. It works both ways. I don't think we should necessarily consider these sessions as being sessions which would identify weaknesses. Because it helps the staff member to be told that the effort they have put in was appreciated by the students. And if a staff member has re-jigged four or five lectures, and they've got new material ready, I think it's helpful, certainly these days with increasing pressure, for them to hear that the students really appreciated it. ... You know when you are having a staff appraisal session at the end of the year you can then pick these points up and you can keep their morale up [laugh]. ... if they feel that their efforts have been recognised by the students.

Rachel: It's interesting that you said that, because most of the conversations I have had so far have been going along the lines that the word 'criticism' means giving negative views.

Lecturer [16]: I don't- You're right, the implication is, and I don't think it should be criticism. The opportunity to comment, I think criticism is the wrong word to use quite a lot of the time, I think it's an opportunity to comment, because just as we will say to the student, "It's a good bit of work", why shouldn't the student have the opportunity to say to the staff, "That was a bloody good lecture - I thoroughly enjoyed that"?

Complacency: This lecturer admits to a sense of relief when he receives good "marks":

Lecturer [6]: Am I in a position to analyse what teaching should be? You know I don't know what 'it' is. ... For what it is it gets a good mark, or whatever. And therefore the lecturer looks at the result and thinks 'I've got a good mark, I don't need to do anything'. It's informing my practice in as much as it's reinforcing my practice. I'll just carry on just doing the same thing. And that is

self-perpetuating as well I think, or can be. But I, you know these are all sort of doubts and questions I have about it which I haven't got any answers to I must admit. I just go on handing these out every year at the end of the course, and getting them back and *[with self-irony]* being very pleased.

The SEQ method of student feedback is framed by the lecturer's university policy and guidelines for good practice. These stipulate that annual evaluation should be conducted via a questionnaire; that 'departments should not rely solely on individual members of teaching staff to conduct their own evaluation'; that 'unambiguously worded' questionnaires 'should provide a measure of students' overall satisfaction with a course [and a] detailed analysis of all its components'; that 'evidence suggests that students prefer questionnaires which require tick-only responses'; and assumes that whilst it is a drawback that responses to an 'open-ended question ... cannot easily be analysed by quantification', these can, nevertheless, 'indicate areas of concern which can be examined by structured questionnaires in future'.

The lecturer recognises and contests the idea of an objective concept of 'good teaching'. Yet the authority of this document throws him into a state of confused self-doubt that undermines his confidence and generates a personal sense of professional inadequacy - despite the "good marks" he receives. His sceptical view of the value of the results conflates with the catharsis of relief at not being revealed as incompetent, to induce a complacency that is reinforced by his feeling that he is not in a legitimate, expert position to reflect on his own practice.

The responsibility the lecturer feels towards his own practice conflicts with his impression that his own perspectives on teaching have no legitimate authority. It is his lack of confidence in his own expertise that, paradoxically, prevents him from taking action to redress the situation. He maintains a position of conscious and 'skilled incompetence' (Argyris 1990): he feels guilty of his own fraud yet grateful for the security of "good marks" that do not call his expertise and professionalism into question.

6.3. A contrasting perspective on professional development

Alternative concepts of professional development, evaluation and appraisal contrast with the assumptions of the technical-rational competence based model in two distinct ways. The contrasts inhere in the grounding belief that professional development is best encouraged by processes that mirror the deliberative nature of professional practice:

Deliberative processes such as planning, problem-solving, analysing, evaluating and decision-making lie at the heart of professional work. These processes cannot be accomplished by using procedural knowledge alone or by following a manual. ... typically there will be: some uncertainty about outcomes; guidance from theory which is only partially helpful; relevant but often inconsistent contextual knowledge; pressure on the time available for deliberation; a strong tendency to follow accustomed patterns of thinking; and opportunity, perhaps a requirement to consult or involve other people (Eraut 1992:110).

First the substance of professional practice in teaching is construed as a permanent question; the *nature* of professional practice is conceptualised as continual investigation, interpretation and judgement of the nature of the *problem* of teaching-learning:

The complex and dynamic character of the unstructured situations which have to be handled requires that what constitutes an appropriate response has to be left open to the discretion of the practitioner (Elliott 1991:122-3).

The information [evaluation techniques] produce must be subject to further critical reflection and interpretation if it is to lead to an evaluation from which we can learn. ... evaluation can be seen as 'a mere beginning in a series of questions' (Rowland 1993:135-6).

Professional development is conceptualised as, and is facilitated by, a situated learning *process*. The process is centred on both lecturers' and students' subjective perceptions and interpretations of teaching-learning; it demands qualitative inputs by the students and lecturers who are implicated in the teaching-learning relation. The process necessitates a conscious co-management of interactive deliberation and negotiation; it is compatible with a concept of learning as the inter-subjective and socially constructed production of meaning:

A major role for the tutor is to ... engage with students in their processes of thinking things through in order to enquire into their knowledge, feelings, values and so on. ... Such a way of interacting with students involves a preparedness to question

everyday assumptions concerning the meaning of phenomena: to be open to the strangeness (and indeed ingenuity) of what the students have to say; to be open to what significance they give to their work; to see and listen to them afresh.

(Rowland 1993:28-9)

Moreover, it is compatible with learning as an 'engaged' conversation:

knowledge-oriented activities produce a developmental process on the part of those engaged on them ... bona fide knowledge activities have something of the character of a conversation. For in genuine conversation, in which parties are seriously trying to sustain and advance their mutual understanding, we find ... interaction, personal commitment and a measure of openness (Barnett 1990:43-44).

It is a model of professional development in which the practitioner is subject, agent and object in the process of grappling with the question of what might constitute effective teaching.

Second, professional competence is conceptualised as the motivation to enhance the application of knowledges, skills, experience and judgements, such that these realise as practice, and through practice, the responsibilities and obligations that the professional bears to others. Professional competence entails, and can be demonstrated through, an openness to enquiry and questioning both within, and outside, the teaching activity. Evaluation becomes a formative activity that simultaneously evidences and develops professional competence; the imperative is to develop a secure environment in which

taking action, taking risks, using imagination and stimulating creativity are both possible and paramount. Fish (1991:27-8) describes how developmental evaluation reflects a 'professional artistry' model of professional competence:

This model ... stresses understanding rather than technical skills, and takes a holistic approach to skills and knowledge involved. ... It emphasises improvisation ... [and] mystery rather than mastery. That is, it accepts that it is not possible to know everything and it sees as more valuable open capacities and competencies that cannot be mastered, rather than the closed ones that can ... [It] stresses moral rather than purely technical accountability ... This model views knowledge as temporary, dynamic and problematic rather than absolute and permanent ... it sees the practitioner as continually investigating his/her own practice. The aim of research is improved insight into practice and the refinement of it ... what is sought is data (rather than evidence), and an attempt to understand better the complex human arena (rather than setting out to prove some aspect of it).

Appraisal becomes a matter of establishing how the lecturer attempts to inform and enhance his or her practice. It is oriented to facilitating growth in the lecturer's competence in the key aspects of their professional practice - evaluation and enquiry:

important for understanding the situation is knowledge of the themes, perceptions and priorities of clients, co-professionals as other interested parties. Whilst some may be explicitly stated, others may be hidden, implicit and difficult to detect. Thus one of the most challenging and creative aspects of the information-gathering

process is the elucidation of different people's definitions of the situation. ... One problem for the professional is the difficulty of evaluating new ideas on the basis of limited information. ... Thus the skills of acquiring and evaluating information about new ideas and new forms of practice are probably more important than the retention in memory of an increasingly obsolescent block of propositional knowledge (Eraut 1992:111).

Moreover, this contrasting view of professional development starts with, and depends on, a belief that the professional *already possesses* high levels of skill, competence, knowledge and integrity. The professional's existing beliefs, habits and common sense assumptions are valued rather than rejected as flawed; they are valued because these constitute, and are manifest as, existing practices, and because they are the substance on which, and with which, the developmental activities work. This approach to development assumes and trusts the professional's sense of responsibility and obligation to others:

Some people see the accountability of the teacher as a professional to her or himself and her or his students as the starting point for developmental evaluation. Political and bureaucratic evaluation may sometimes be focused on rooting out incompetence and policing behaviours. Those wishing to use developmental evaluation need to assume that the tutor is competent, well intentioned and interested in improving their teaching and student learning for their own sake, not because otherwise they would be 'exposed', or would lose funding or promotion prospects (Ashcroft and Palacino 1996:106).

6.4. The relationship between process and product

without insight, interpretation and understanding, information is blind

(Barnett 1994:42).

I don't know *what* I'm doing: In Chapter 5 I argued that lecturers' and students' concerns with student feedback centred on the dominant use of a method of student feedback that they find lacking in information value. The methodological constraints of the SEQ posit tight restrictions on the form and content of the evaluative activity. The contemporary use and purposes of the SEQ necessitate standardised questionnaire formats which generate information that is aggregated to a high degree of generality. The information is restrictive, decontextualised and need not necessarily engage with the lecturer's own interests and concerns about teaching-learning:

Lecturer [7]: But certainly I wasn't very impressed with the questionnaire, shall we say (laugh). No, it asked a lot of questions I wasn't remotely interested in. ... I think it depends again on the exact context, of what you are trying to do. ... I think it's very difficult to formulate simple questions that can be informative. If the answers are then going to be pooled and averaged, I think- We get an average of "How difficult was it". We didn't see that the students that found it difficult were the ones who thought the overheads were nicely presented, or something like that. I mean that sort of analysis would be much more helpful. The individualisation of the responses would help because the- You know just amorphising them, making them just one mass of students is a nonsense, because there are students in there who are struggling across the board everywhere. And others who are high flyers, clear firsts. And to mix the responses of both

students into one set of answers is an obvious nonsense. So I mean just suppose as a random example that, I get positive responses from 80%, and negative responses from 20%. If all I get is a random, you know just a mass number, I don't know if those 20% are the strugglers, the high flyers or are split between. I don't know if I hitting the 2 ends but missing the middle, I don't know what I'm doing.

The lecturer needs to know more about the individuals whose rankings have been aggregated; without this it is difficult to interpret the meaning, significance and implications of the results.

You have to read between the lines: This next lecturer found that he had to draw on other sources of information in order to establish what the numerical scores and brief comments indicated, and also what he should do to rectify the situation; the informative value of the feedback results is low. They are of little assistance in development without further investigations; the lecturer is unable to arrive at an understanding of his practice without contextualising, explanatory information, and without bringing his own assumptions into question. This indicates that the results are not meaningful indications, or meaningful summative assessments, of the lecturer's practice.

Lecturer [2]: For a long time I thought the response- I was getting poor responses and I tended to assume that it was because [the courses] were difficult. But eventually I have succeeded in changing the course, and more particularly in changing my delivery of the courses. ... It took me quite a while to figure out how to respond in a way that got something positive.

Rachel: What made it difficult for you to respond, do you think?

Lecturer [2]: ... I actually think in some ways although the responses told me they were having problems with the course, in the end they didn't actually tell me the information I needed to know.

And one of the things I know that certainly made a difference with my delivery was just reading the Don's Diary in the Times Higher. ... All I tended to get in the comments - which is actually sometimes useful, in terms of telling you what you might be doing wrong as distinct from they don't like it - was actually not very useful. Because it tended to boil down to "difficult", "boring", "hard subject", you know. It didn't really tell me how I could improve it.

The lecturer responds to the situation in line with the contrasting concept of professional practice contained in the previous section of this chapter. The lecturer progresses his practice in teaching by deliberating on a range of propositional, experiential, coincidental and practical forms of knowledge. He improvises, and eventually arrives at an adequate solution. It is however salient that the inducement to further investigation is prompted by the felt need to gain positive feedback. In addition, both the problem, and the improved feedback concern questions of presentation. He continues:

Lecturer [2]: Now I have made other changes, I'm not just saying that turning round and facing them rather than the board has been the only thing. I have changed the content, I have slanted the content differently as well. ... And I've tried to increase the number of actual practice problems that they do for instance. ... I've got comments now about the clarity of presentation and things, that I am pretty certain come from doing just one or two just basic changes, which actually I did pick up on by reading something completely different. ... I think that you have to read between the lines in one sense, and come to your own judgement. Yes, because I see the

numerical scores for the whole- for all the courses. And I can make sort of guesses about why certain of my colleagues might be having problems about things, but I am not going to be able to unpick those numerical scores, apart from making some guesswork. ... [My own results] gave me a push in one direction, and I was already trying to change things in that direction, but that wasn't actually solving the problem. And I think I only really got to grips with the whole problem when I picked up on other things, which were rather more hidden.

They get a reactive document rather than a reflective document: Students find student feedback contradictory, because they are neither given time to reflect, nor space to express and explain their views sufficiently for these to be informative and helpful to the lecturer:

Student [7]: They give you like 15 minutes. Some of it's really difficult. ... Some of the questions require you to think over what was the best, what was the worst, and those kind of things. And within a short period of reflection like that it's not easy. What you are likely to do is an intuitive thing. ... in the last 15 minutes you are being asked to look over a 15 week period perhaps, with a reading week in between, and your memory physically does not pick up quickly enough. And the things that come quickly into your memory are from the immediate past. ... Without having to sit down and go like, 'Hmmm, let's take a step back, what have we been through?', the reflective process hasn't been allowed to happen so they get a reactive document rather than a reflective document.

Students know that the information has limited value; it is insufficiently explained to be of use, or insufficiently justified such that the student can be sure that the lecturer will be able to identify the reasons for a student's ranking and begin to understand their point of view. Without this, the information is either unusable because it is meaningless, or dismissed because it is categorical.

The above analysis can be extended to demonstrate that lecturers and students find the SEQ method to be devoid of process value. The process of student feedback is a vital question.

It turns into a discussion. People build on each other's ideas: First, students need to be given the time, space and stimulus for greater degrees of reflection and the opportunity to think through their ideas and experiences with others:

Lecturer [12]: I think if you tried, if you came up with a questionnaire that asked questions that are really too deep, it would go over the heads of some of them [laugh]. I think the best thing is if you say you know, "Yes or no, or +2 to -2, how do you feel about that?".

Rachel: Do you think that they wouldn't be prepared to think that deeply?

Lecturer [12]: Well If you gave them enough time, and got them into the right frame of mind, they might well do it. But I'm not sure whether sitting individually, filling out bits of paper is the way to do it. Where you do get useful ideas I think is in the student forum. We have this forum at the end of the year where they are looking back, you have sort of discussion groups running, effectively, it turns into a discussion. People build on each other's ideas, and you get some quite

good suggestions coming out of that, and then of course they can get instant feedback or response from the staff there. The staff can say "Well we tried it 3 years ago before you came, and it didn't work, but we like that idea, I think we'll try that next year". And that's quite a good way of developing ideas.

The higher level, a higher level of feedback: Second, the form and content of information that lecturers need to hear, and which students feel they need to give are highly contingent on the mode of information gathering. Information that provides a wider and more detailed perspective on a particular issue is useful because it allows the lecturer to understand the student's personal interpretation and assessment of their own problems, and of how these relate to the course and the way it is taught. The form and content of information that is valued is generated through close contact and dialogue with students. The process enables the individual student to express, reason, explain and justify their point of view to the lecturer. The lecturer is able to contextualise the problems the students raise, and deliberate the best course of action in relation to both the specific needs of that student and a wider set of demands and constraints.

Lecturer [4]: I think, although again it becomes rather statistically insignificant and rather anecdotal, often the rather sort of off-the-cuff comments in the corridor or whatever can be the most revealing. ... But again you only get that when the students start to know you a bit better, and are prepared to say, "Well I liked those pictures, but I didn't like that", or "I didn't learn anything yesterday, but you know, it all came to me today". So I think that to a large degree, you only start to get the higher level, a higher level of feedback when the students and yourself have

a good rapport at any level. And they think that you value their comments. If they don't think you value their comments, they're not going to give good comments. And to some extent the only way that they are going to know if you are going to value their comments is when they get to know you better, [and] they realise that you do care what's happening, that it is worth them saying something. And that you probably won't take offence if it is a realistic criticism. But that takes a while to establish, and again it doesn't happen when you pop in and give a lecture and disappear.

You need to be able to talk that through: Third, despite the self-acknowledged responsibility the student has for learning, students still feel a need for reassurance:

Student [4]: I think they just believe that you have come here because you want to learn and if you are not prepared to learn just go home. I think that is probably University in general, I'd imagine that attitude from most lecturers, and I think that's fair enough. Although sometimes you need a bit of encouragement.

Rachel: What sort of form would that encouragement take?

Student [4]: I don't know. Maybe a bit more personal interaction sort of, sort of, "You'll be all right", from your tutors.

An interactive, discussion based form of feedback is also a two-way process. The process is productive because it is beneficial to the student's understanding of the course demands, and because it offers the student a degree of support. The next lecturer describes how the two-way dynamic of interaction enables her to engage in dialogue

such that the student gains new insights into the issues that they have raised with the lecturer as 'problems'; the student finds reassurance in a situation they experience as problematic, and about which they may feel insecure:

Lecturer [3]: There are very important issues for students which you have to listen to and advise on, but also there are issues that students have never thought about, and if you don't actually bring those out, you can't expect them to be able to think about them. ... You know it's very easy to ask a sort of bland question, but you need to be able to talk that through, because they might not have appreciated all the aspects of it. ... I think, sometimes they have very valid comments that you perhaps haven't thought about yourself, so you think "Yes that's interesting yeah, you're absolutely right". But other times there are situations where you think, "OK you've got an issue with this, let's talk about it", and then once you've actually explained it's, "Oh right, oh well". I mean they've got so many things that they're doing, so many pressures on them, so many people pulling them in all sorts of ways, they often actually miss things. ... So I mean they do need reassuring, as we've said. I mean there's all these different roles aren't there. There's the kicking, there's the patting on the back.

Dialogue with students enables the lecturer to fulfil more than one of their professional obligations to the student.

The student has somewhere to go to: The *two-way* nature of dialogue constitutes, and reflects, *mutual* commitment and responsibility between students and lecturers. It also produces information of a higher quality. The next lecturer identifies that "real

feedback" is obtainable only from face to face interaction:

Lecturer [9]: I think my basic thoughts are that feedback in both directions is pretty poor. The only real feedback that we've got- It's basically the tutorial system. ... it's only if a student then brings that piece of work to their tutor and discusses it that you get any real feedback. Or you as a tutor, or as a year tutor, see a potential problem with a student, and you try and get that student in to discuss it. So we certainly do need to maintain the strength of the tutorial system, of personal tutors. The student has somewhere to go to and you have a group of students that you feel more responsible for. Because again, otherwise with the increasing numbers of students, you can get very impersonal.

The conditions that give rise to student feedback are a social and socially situated process of interpersonal dialogue. The process is beneficial because it gives the student an entity to which to belong, the security of a sense of belonging, and the promise of a source of support. In contrast, the SEQ method is largely invisible to the student; it is processed by unknown others. The alienating experience replicates the student's feelings of being 'lost' within a complex, impersonal and mystically-bureaucratic institution:

Student [6]: I mean I could drop down dead and no one would notice for 8 weeks literally. ... there are big, you know, major gaps, big holes in the way the system, is connected together. ... [In a modular system] it's very difficult to get the feeling that you know where you are, that someone is piecing it all together for you and saying this is how your degree is going. ... It's just sometimes annoying that you can't turn somewhere and say, "What's going on, where am I?"

Lecturer [4]: [It's better when] we actually know the students ... you can build up some sort of genuine rapport. ... I think that this has been lost in a way with this centralisation and modularisation, where students are shunted round from lecture to lecture. They never get to know, and the staff never get to know a small group of students, where things can be discussed in an informal and non-threatening environment. The exact opposite of that. ... If it's a scattered course with scattered staff and students you have to have a piece of paper. But then it just adds to the "Well I'm just a number and I'll just tick the boxes and it goes through a computer and nothing happens".

Student [4]: Here you are like, "Shit I can't find-", I can't find my tutor for like 2 weeks sometimes. She's only here on 1 day a week. And that's a nightmare, that is a complete nightmare. Because you are thinking, "I've got this really big important thing to discuss", and there's no one here to discuss it with you.

You would go and see him and talk about it. He would listen, you could tell that: Students also feel that the better lecturers are those that already demonstrate a high level of communicative interaction with students; these lecturers are 'good teachers', and with such 'teachers' formal feedback is both redundant and unnecessary. Lecturers who demonstrate interest in student feedback demonstrate their interest in teaching, and, by implication, their care and concern for the students:

Student [1]: The lecturer I mentioned earlier, he chose 30 people at random to meet with him every couple of weeks to discuss how the course was going. You would go and see him and talk

about it. I can't remember what I wrote, but I remember writing a long list- I wrote a long letter to him, anonymously, so I don't know what his response was. And I think quite a few people did because he was asking for it. He was obviously really concerned that he was teaching well, and he would listen, you could tell that, so he would listen to whatever you had to say. A lot of people, even if they didn't like his teaching, they definitely liked his motives, they definitely saw that he was the most concerned for us, and the most teacher-like of the lecturers.

The signals that indicate the lecturer's concern are the presence of a process of talking and listening. Students feel that lecturers who rely solely on the SEQ method of communication demonstrate a lack of interest and concern for both teaching and the students. The SEQ is inevitably unhelpful, its use symbolises both the idea that there is an institutionalised lack of genuine attention to teaching, and the idea that teaching lacks significant status. Without the talking and listening, without the recognition, motivation, stimulation and opportunity for mutual learning that accrues through interaction, the student is left without guidance and the lecturer is left without the opportunity to discuss what might be of importance to the student and of interest to the lecturer.

The means to get that feedback through: Students require a process that obviates the isolation of mass higher education, that overcomes the threats of criticising the authoritative experts, and that enables them to work through the difficulties of reflection, expression and constructive explanation. Without this, they are left without a means to voice their views:

Student [2]: In compulsory courses where there are 150 people in the lecture, the person who organises the course is not known personally to all 150 people. It would be quite easy to take any questions you have about that course to your personal tutor, or comments. But if you haven't got that relationship with a personal tutor either, the personal tutor that you are supposed to have that relationship with, then certainly the feedback is not going to get through. You take it to the Staff/Student Liaison Committee, but how many of those people, elected students, are going to be confident enough to go in and slate a course in front of half a dozen lecturers or whatever, when the person responsible for that course is sitting there. And how many of those students who are confident to do that will put it in a constructive way? I think the answer is not many. And that is another way that the feedback doesn't get through. I think that it's far too easy for student to say, "Well I don't like it". It's far more difficult to put it constructively and I think by putting it constructively it's going to be so much easier to get that feedback through. But because the *means* to get that feedback through isn't as perfect as it could be, I think that it just doesn't work out at all - (my emphasis).

6.5 Conclusion: I was somewhere near, somewhere near them

Lecturer [7]: The most positive feedback that I had, was just at a time that I was down in the library, and one of the students came and asked me- She was doing a literature survey, and wanted to find a paper I had referred to, a bit of data, in one of the lectures, and she used my first name. And that's surprising, but pleasant - I mean I always find it uncomfortable when they say "Dr [Surname]", because (laugh) it's almost as though they're not sure where the distance is, and

they think it's safe to start there, and they'll only use the first name when they know it's safe to do so. But that particular student felt it was safe immediately, to use the first name. You know that was positive. I wasn't right the way back, away from the students. I was somewhere near, somewhere near them. It may or may not be of direct educational value. I'm sure indirectly it will, if what I was doing was such that it would benefit from me being near them.

Mandatory evaluation of teaching using an institutionally authorised, standardised procedure is perceived as a form of professional development underpinned by ideas of threat. The SEQ is experienced by these lecturers as penalty bearing surveillance; it generates fear, damaged relationships and self-doubt. This standardised criterion-based student feedback method both disempowers the lecturer and is experienced as an alienating, unproductive, and often irrelevant use of time and administrative effort.

Students experience the SEQ as a mechanism that contradicts its own intentions. Because it neither allows them to express or explain their feedback, nor leads to mutual and interactive engagement, they feel it lacks information and process value. For these reasons, they suspect that the SEQ is inevitably unproductive.

The contention that surrounds lecturers' talk of student feedback is a product of the conflation, of technicist, competence based concepts of professional practice and evaluation, with the simultaneous incursion of penalty bearing performance appraisal. The SEQ is a useful tool only in so far as it is compatible with the externally driven assumptions and imperatives of internal and external performance management, scrutiny and judgement. In a situation where quality assurance and assessment activities value cultures and practices that emphasise and value 'control', the SEQ introduces

standardised definitions of 'good teaching', and promotes a concept of professional development as remedial action instigated by managers. For lecturers, the SEQ is a practice whose potentially negative ramifications must be mediated and neutralised.

The SEQ is a summative, rather than formative evaluation; whilst it is a meaningless summary of the professional's practice, it generates conditions for evaluation that contradict rhetorical policy claims that student feedback leads to the enhancement of professional practice. It undermines and devalues the professional's own responsibility for initiating creative means of investigation that bear the authority of an individual professional's integrity and sense of relevance, and that generate action authorised on the basis of genuine interest, experiment and informed negotiation between the 'expert', their peers and their students.

Lecturers' and students' concerns contain implicit and explicit expressions of the need for a qualitative, interactive and mutually shared *process* of evaluation and development. From both the lecturers' and students' perspectives this process is a form of learning, where increased understanding, security and motivation are benefits that accrue to both parties to the evaluation process. Paradoxically, whilst they feel that SEQ data might arguably *lead* to 'engaged' conversation, and whilst they find that without this subsequent 'engagement' the information is without value, higher levels of interpersonal interaction generate higher levels of feedback, and these render the SEQ data redundant.

Student feedback is essentially a process of contact and communication; this interpersonal, interactive process is significant, and can be of benefit, to students and lecturers at even the smallest instances of intimacy. Moreover the process depends on, and develops the good relationships on which engaged conversation and mutual learning are contingent.

SECTION THREE

Conclusions

- 1. What student feedback means to students and lecturers: the incorporation of the policy agenda.**

1.1 Lecturers

Formalisation: To lecturers, student feedback is associated with the imperative to make manifest, in the form of a documented and evidenced audit trail, inter-personal and non-routine processes of exchanging views with students, about students' experiences of teaching and their progress in learning. The imperative derives externally in what is felt to be an increasingly assertive and penetrative policy agenda. It is also enforced internally, through top-down management pressure and policy for the use of the evaluation questionnaire. The imperative is realised as a process of formalisation; formalisation is recognised both through the bureaucratisation of routines and procedures for the administration of a questionnaire, and in the mandated bureaucratic task of questionnaire completion and analysis. Lecturers interpret the imperatives and implications of formalisation through a contrast; formalised 'official' procedures contrast in form, process and product with their own efforts and interests in pursuing

alternative means of eliciting students' views. Formalised communication also contrasts with their experiences of ad hoc exchanges with individual students.

Paradox: Lecturers' responses to their experiences of formalisation are both positive and negative. Some felt it virtuous to make explicit, and visible, as policy, procedure and practice, what had previously been perhaps sporadic activity by the well intentioned. Developing policy, procedure, and practice that was adequate to meet the needs of statutory assessments and audit, and also maximised efficiency in use of time and administrative resource, was also felt to be a virtuous goal. Yet these urges forged a paradox: first the lecturers put themselves in a position where malpractice, inefficiency and non-responsiveness would *also* be visible to the interested observer. The interested observer, whether TQA assessor, Auditor, or student may also bring sanctions. This then accentuated the felt need *for* formalisation. Second, and in conjunction, the increased 'efficiency' necessitated pursuing activities that were, lecturers admitted and contended, largely unproductive.

Cost: Whilst formalisation is a construct conceptualised and realised in contrast, it is also forced within, and by, a policy context that simultaneously generates suspicion, threat, fear and division. The meaning of student feedback, as a symbol of, and tool associated with that policy context, is informed by negative and defensive feelings. Moreover, the unproductive nature of the formalised concept and practice of 'communication', whether construed as lecturer-student dialogue, or as means of generating information that may be of value to the lecturers' professional development, becomes object of contention. Student feedback is a cost of time and administrative resource, at a time when these costs are felt deeply.

Assault and Insult: Student feedback is an assault on the lecturers' sense of professionalism: professionalism constitutes care and concern for the students' development as learners and graduates of an academic discipline. Professionalism also constitutes acceptance of the lecturer's responsibility for self-development in teaching. Yet in its formal form as the questionnaire, student feedback is also an insult to, and insulting definition of, lecturers' concepts of, and professional competence in teaching. The questionnaire reflects an impoverished conceptualisation of both the research question and the object of study. Lecturers construed both the research question, and the object of study, in terms of the demands of the particular subject-discipline.

Unjustified and unsuitable: It is difficult to assess how confident lecturers were about their own competence in teaching. Many asserted a degree of personal competence, others were less self-assured; this insecurity may reflect the potentially punitive consequences of negative results: negative results risk the lecturer's reputation and esteem as person, professional and departmental colleague. Furthermore, whilst it is not possible to ascertain the degree to which lecturers' were cognisant or confident of the qualities of their efforts in enhancing their practice in teaching, the processes they pursued in this regard are markedly similar to Eraut's, Elliot's and Rowland's depictions of the negotiated, deliberative and collaborative nature of professional practice and learning.

Lecturers' use of questionnaire results was either minimal, or made in combination with other sources of information, such as their own experiences as students, their experiences as teachers, formal and informal literature, and discussions with students and peers. Lecturers' attitudes to the questionnaire reflected these dispositions towards,

and skills of enquiry. Lecturers expressed distaste for the crude nature of the concept, process and results of the questionnaire form of student feedback research. However, their use of different 'knowledge resources' is also compatible with ideas of professional learning and practice. Professional learning complements the questioning attitude, reflective disposition and professional skills of the academic.

Confusion: During the interviews, lecturers began to express, perhaps even discover, a level of confusion and uncertainty about the contradiction between the imperative to use the questionnaire and their own ideas of what is helpful to their development as teachers. Their own understanding and confidence as researchers and teachers, conflicted with the supposedly informed policy that mandated the questionnaire as means to investigate and evaluate their own teaching; both contradiction and conflict were expressed in ways that serve as evidence of a process of 'de-skilling'.

The customer: At the same time, student feedback is associated with the introduction of market forces and marketised cultures within higher education. When viewed as a practice that is compatible with, and enables, these forces and cultures, student feedback reflects and produces consumer relations between students and lecturers. This consumer relation stands in tension with lecturers' ideas of their own role as professional educators: the professional is guide and stimulus, rather than 'spoon feeder', entertainer or service provider responsible for meeting the customers' own ideas of need and desire. Professionalism in teaching requires that students also understand that their correct role is to act with degrees of self-responsibility and independence. Thus student feedback is a mechanism that is perceived as threatening to the foundations of both good personal relations between students and lecturers, and of

effective educational relations between learners and teachers engaged in the processes and tasks of developing mutual understanding of the demands and subject-matter of academic study.

1.2 Students

An opportunity for dialogue: Students expressed positive sentiments towards student feedback in the sense that they saw it as potential opportunity for dialogue with lecturers; this dialogue was felt to be beneficial because it would both enhance their levels of security and motivation, and also give them the chance to discuss any perceived problems they had in learning, or with the course. Dialogue would also bring the benefits of enhanced personal relations because the student would be able to explain, negotiate and represent problems and proposed solutions such they could convey the impression, to the lecturer, that they were reflective, independent learners, and were tentative and considered in their assessments and criticisms of the lecturer. Moreover personal interaction and exchange provided the student with a sense of recognition and belonging; these were needed within an environment they found alienating impersonal, and Kafkesque. Personal relations, security and recognition also provided the base from which students could question and display insecurity or lack of understanding. They felt that when lecturers showed sufficient interest in the students as individuals, or demonstrated their interest in students through concern for their teaching, students understood the lecturer to be 'teacher-like'. The 'teacher' provides the stimulation, reassurance and guidance that the student needs in order to pursue their own role as independent student responsible for their own learning.

The denial of that opportunity: However, students' main experience of student feedback came in the form of the routine tedium of completing the un-stimulating tick-box questionnaire. Whilst unchallenged to question their assumptions about the demands of learning and its relation to teaching, students also felt restricted by constraints of the paper-based method. They were neither able to satisfy their own needs for expression of thought, nor satisfied that they had explained themselves sufficiently such that the lecturer would understand, accept as justified, and be assisted by the comments or criticisms the students wanted to offer as 'help' for the lecturer's development.

A reflection of context: Students' impressions of the questionnaire were formed in dialectic relation to their experiences of the university. The questionnaire was thought of as a tokenistic procedure enforced internally by managers on elusive lecturers who were unwilling or unable to change their practices, and took place within an ossified institution concerned to protect and promulgate its own norms and conventions. In return, their impressions of teaching, learning and lecturers' dispositions towards students were confirmed in their ideas of a means of student feedback that restricted their expressions of concern and criticism, and produced results that were analysed and acted upon (or not) by invisible others in unknown domains. The bureaucratic structure, and administrative procedure of the questionnaire, confirmed students' suspicions of inertia, and confirmed their sense of being lost in a large, uncaring, loosely coupled and impenetrable institution.

The customer: Students' sense of their own role and identity would suggest that the discursive construct, and the continuing pejorative discourse of the 'student-customer' are not only misplaced, but also unjustified. Moreover, although the students' interpretations of their role and identity are formed relative to the culture and individuals that they encounter, they are also difficult to construe as compatible with theoretical ideas of the dispositions of the 'customer'. Whilst students desire greater levels of participation and influence, they would presumably resist the behaviours associated with the epithet 'customer' as both unsuited to the cultural context, and unworkable as means of bringing change within that context. Students find the questionnaire unhelpful and yet recognise it as the official, legitimated means of 'communication' they feel the questionnaire to be *disempowering*.

This finding calls into question the logic and assertions of both the ideological rhetoric and statutory practices that are associated with 'quality' assurance, and contradicts the assumptions that 'quality' management initiatives are an effective approach to 'empowering' the student. Market concepts of management emphasise the role of the 'customer' as means, ends and judge of 'quality'. At a time when these concepts are drawn on within an encroaching and assertive managerialist culture, it is perhaps surprising that students see themselves as unimportant. What is significant is that the negative discourse, that is generated by, and is reflected in, the idea of the 'student consumer', back fires on students. At the same time, it distorts lecturers' impressions of students' needs and attitudes, and thus disrupts the lecturers' view of the student such that they fail to recognise that students' ideas of their own role are not so different to the ones that lecturers seek to promote.

1.3 Lecturers and Students

Communication: The questionnaire does not reflect concern, and does not enable the student to gain powers of 'voice'. It does not bring students and lecturers into contact with each other, and does not constitute 'communication'. Rather, the questionnaire contradicts such concerns and exaggerates the problems that accrue from *lack* of communication. The questionnaire is the reverse of the dialogue and personal relations that the students require: for their own and the lecturer's benefit.

The 'communication' students wanted with lecturers constituted a social and educational 'contract' focused on the complex process of making sense of the demands of both subject-matter and academic study. Lecturers also spoke of a 'contract'; they defined the contract in terms of a commitment to students, to their own subject discipline and to ensure the students understood, and could cope with the intellectual, theoretical and practical demands of that discipline. However it is for reason of the 'contract' that lecturers resist the practice and implications of the results of student feedback. Lecturers are required to pursue and to express their 'contractual' *commitment* via the administration of an evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire uses criteria that focus on only superficial aspects of teaching, is attached to potentially punitive sanctions, and is perceived as harmful to the secure social conditions and supportive and open relations necessary for teaching and learning.

Superficiality: The main idea implied by lecturers' and students' perceptions and experiences of student feedback, and an idea that lies at the root of the contention,

controversy and confusion surrounding the concept and practice of student feedback, is that of 'superficiality'.

The imperative for documented information originates in the criteria for, and demands of, national accountability exercises; these seek assurance of academic performance, and yet pursue this goal through means that examine merely the appearances of teaching and learning. Assessors and auditors look for a formalised system of procedures for dealing with the statistical representations of the experience of teaching and learning. Moreover the results will reflect students' immediate thoughts, rather than considered reflections, because students have only a minimal amount of time to give rankings against criteria that may be irrelevant to students and inconsequential to lecturers.

This is an inadequate means of expressing and realising concern for teaching-learning, for students, and for lecturers' professional development. Moreover, any integrity and authentic motivation on the part of the lecturer is undermined because students interpret the bureaucratic form of 'communication' as tokenistic 'lip service', unless *accompanied by* the more meaningful and significant experience of the lecturer's longitudinal and 'live' expressions of concern. The questionnaire is no substitute for interactive, inter-personal relations and 'communication'.

Whilst the policy agenda promotes a questionnaire form of student feedback, and demands its practice by implication of the criteria for assessment and audit, the agenda, and the questionnaire form of student feedback generate tension, contention, conflict and confusion. Whilst receiving 'high scores' may not be a laudable event for the

lecturer, this lends the appearance of 'good teaching' at the same time as the lecturer finds justification for his or her own inactivity and complacency in professional development. These two 'costs' add to the costs associated with the consumption of time and administrative resource. The impact of policy is the production of documentation that is inert representation of teaching and learning practices and may do little to induce or inform change: it is merely evidence of its own procedure.

2. Policy Implications

In contrast to the assertion that resistance to 'quality' assurance is an attempt to avoid scrutiny, the evidence lecturers provide in this study is that they desire and accept the demand for observation: they are willing to hold themselves to account on professional and moral grounds. Lecturers speak as professionals who are interested in informing their own practice. Resistance is the product of fear, a reaction to assault and insult, and a reflection of the impoverished concepts of teaching, learning and professional development represented in the criteria and process of the student evaluation questionnaire.

The policy implication of these findings is the suggestion that quality assurance and assessment is best pursued by means that require the lecturers to engage in evaluation processes that draw on, and support the motivations, skills and commitments which they already possess. The substance and result of the information that they seek, are qualities that are contingent on the process. The information, and the result sought, are produced in dialogue with others. This dialogue, with students and peers is informed by

experiential and propositional knowledge, is enhanced through mutual questioning and debate, and is focused on problems which lecturers construe, and students propose, as vital to the demands of teaching and learning in a particular subject-discipline.

Lecturers should be required to act in terms of the professionalism they already feel. They should engage in processes of information seeking in which the process is as rewarding as the information gleaned; where the result is greater understanding and informed action. Lecturers should be supported as, and required to act as the professionals that they claim to be. This would reduce the fear and threat of the assault and insult and thus enhance confidence, security and self-esteem sufficiently to encourage the lecturer to question, and to take the risk of acting on the questions and any answers proposed by inquiries. The process suggested here also provides students with the foundations of, and opportunity for, the dialogue and relations that they seek with the intimidating but legitimate and authoritative experts for whom they have respect. The dialogue may lead to their greater understanding of, and confidence in, their environment, their relations with others, and the demands and constraints they face. This may then provide for their self-empowerment, and be conducive to a form of communicative engagement that asks for, informs and stimulates change.

The evidence that assessors and auditors should seek is evidence of the rationale that underpins, the processes employed for, and the change brought about by, this 'professional' engagement in student feedback. This evidence cannot be demonstrated merely by documented procedure; neither can the practices it involves be realised through bureaucratic procedures. The 'professional' engagement is certainly more challenging than the administration of the questionnaire; whilst this may provide for the

'rigour' that 'quality' assessors and auditors assert is necessary, it also provides greater empowerment, stimulus and interest for those engaged in the activity itself.

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