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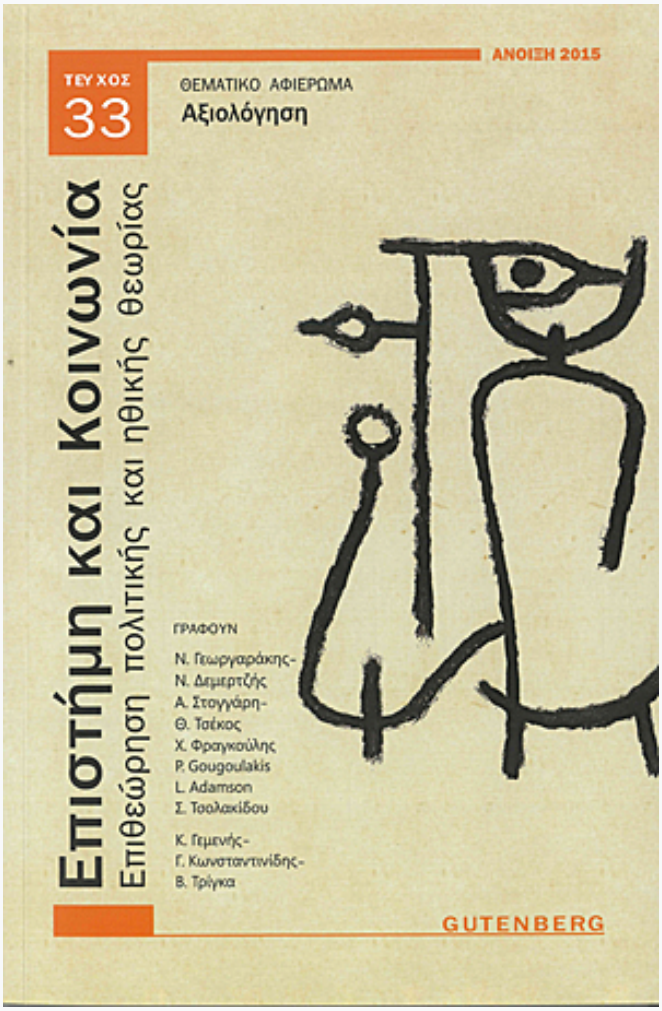

New Public Management Regime and Quality in Higher Education

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NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REGIME AND QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A spectre has been haunting the public administration of Western countries –the spectre of New Public Management. This has been all too visible for quite a while, and it coincides with the increasing prevalence of a producing and consuming neo-liberal ideology that has profoundly pervaded all aspects of society, culture and the economy in the current information and globalization era, the dawn of which took place in the early 1970s (Borg & Mayo 2005; Castells 2000; Lengrand 1970). The education sector, and the universities in particular, were no exception. Their alleged autonomy was invaded by neo-liberal 'forces' and changed to the point beyond recognition, which has seriously violated the employees' professional integrity and expertise. As the university gradually transformed into a mass educational institution, without being accompanied by a corresponding increase in resources, the academic staff was constantly reminded that the quality of their work must be raised and ultimately assured. Words and phrases as quality assurance, quality indicators, quality and accountability measures,

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evaluation, learning outcomes, etc., penetrated academic life without the consent of the majority of the employees. Hence, this discursive shift was a new reality, imposed though from the outside. It is therefore not surprising that disagreement within academic circles and opposition from significant segments of the civil society was at times vehement. The introduction of the new control regime was perceived more as a threat than as a democratic development based on collegial consensus.

In the present text, an attempt is made to approach the notion of quality in higher education through the prism of the New Public Management approach. The main question being addressed is:

What exactly do proponents of New Public Management mean by quality in higher education, what does it entail regarding the staff's professional integrity and development as well as the assurance of the quality of education offered?

Education evaluation as an issue of governance

EVALUATION has always been an inherent phenomenon of public sector services and particularly of educational institutions and processes. It is an effective mechanism for exerting social control in a general sense. Within the educational domain, evaluation is hierarchically maintained, with the overall aim to regulate individual and group behaviour to achieve conformity and compliance, in accordance with what the state and the culture wish to shape them into (Bernstein & Lundgren 1983, Sjöstrand 1968). Schematically speaking, the control endeavour is directed from the Government and the Ministry of Education, via its specialised governmental agencies/authorities, towards the individual Higher Education Institution (HEI), which in turn through its administration deploys control over the staff which, ultimately, control their students. Ordinarily, evaluation as a means of social control has always been associated with various kinds of rewards or sanctions, symbolic as well as pecuniary (see e.g. Lena Adamson's contribution in this issue).

Even when the declared purpose of social control, through various forms of evaluation activities, such as external assessments and internal quality assurance reviews, is to improve the quality of, for example, teaching and research, the aspect of 'control' is less explicit than in the case of regular audits. At any rate, all these activities refer to specific cultures or discourses of *governance* with more or less distinct power and role divisions between the involved actors in the process of decision-making and implementation. Conceivably, governance is more bearable and effective if it is exerted softly with a high degree of involvement of those evaluated/controlled in the planning and implementation of the evaluation process in question.

Governance is about the power to steer the track of the processes, including laws, norms, information, communication and language, which occur within diverse social spheres. From this vantage point, the phenomenon of *governance* is not new, as the designation entails. Not until the 1980s did the concept become omnipresent as an effect of societal changes and changing social theories replacing the word 'government' (Bevir 2012). Since then, a paradigm shift has taken place in public administration,[1] although this rate of chance has varied in different countries and sectors. The most obvious sign of this transformation is a growing reliance on private and semi-state (semi-public) actors to manage and deliver services, which until then was exclusively a state responsibility. Traditional organisational practices within the public sector are altering in line with the acceleration process that technology and the economy has induced in society and culture, and which underlies other mod-

1. Public administration means the transformation of political decisions and intentions into activities of public policy, directly affecting citizens' welfare. They are implemented by actors engaged in public administration in line with what the legislation prescribes. The terms *public administration*, *public management*, and *public governance* are used here interchangeably, but with the meaning shift entailed from traditional administration to entrepreneurial inspired management, as discussed in the text.

ernization processes, as that of rationalization, individualization or economization (Rosa 2014).

The emergence of new theories and procedures in public management raises a debate about what the government forces and the role of politics in the new state are, and what constitutes a good management culture. There are numerous views, usually conflicting ones, due to ideological and political frames of reference on the characteristics of good governance. As an illustrative example the European Commissions White Paper on Governance could be mentioned. The White Paper identifies five principles which underpin good governance, and recommends the changes that ought to occur. The principles *openness*, *participation*, *accountability*, *effectiveness* and *coherence* are considered very important for establishing more democratic governance as '(t)hey underpin democracy and the rule of law in the Member States, but they apply to all levels of government —global, European, national, regional and local' (EU Commission 2001; see also Treib 2014).

The concept of governance has become popular because it represents a management approach that fits in well with the changes that have taken place. The most uncontentious of all these changes is the domination of a market economic doctrine, which exerts substantial influence on the management of traditionally bureaucratic and hierarchical public institutions, as in the case of public schools. Centralized educational bureaucracies are being dismantled in many countries by students and parents alike, by launching systems emphasizing 'freedom of choice' when it comes to educational services and providers. Education is perceived as a commodity and the student as a customer. Hence, a language and a reality that belongs to the domain of marketing has permeated the education sector. This linguistic turnaround is a reality and the language of education has been endowed with vocabulary from the business world. Since language has sufficient power to influence human practices, privatization and marketization with their associated attributes, such as efficiency, effectiveness, competition, quality, responsibility

and accountability, there followed the establishment of a new management reality challenging, thereby, the habitual culture of the collegial 'governance' culture in Education Institutions (cf. Whitty & Power 2000).

In the next section of this paper, the changes labelled as New Public Management (NPM), which have occurred in many countries during the past two-three decades in the public sector, are outlined. NPM has attracted a growing interest in the West and subsequently in countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. All those have, in various ways, introduced NPM aspects in their public sectors. Although NPM comprises a cluster of ideas and, practices that are borrowed from the world of private business, the focus here is on NPM s comprehension of quality as manifested in goods-producing companies (SBS n.d.). NPM s notion of quality is then contrasted with different views/discourses of quality in HE. In the light of these 'qualities' we will conclude with a discussion in which we consider whether NPM is consistent with the task that higher educational institutions are assigned to attain, namely to produce new knowledge, promote learning and educate free and competent citizens so as to prepare them for a democratic society.

New times, new habits

The NPM replaced the old style of public administration, which emerged in the 'progressive era' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because it could no longer defend against corruption:

> The assumption is that politicians are inherently venal, using their public office wherever possible to enrich themselves, their friends and relations, and that reliance on private-sector contracting for public services inevitably leads to high-cost low-quality products, either because of corrupt influence on the contract-awarding process or because the public contract market will come

> to be controlled by organized crime, or both. Whether these assumptions can be safely dispensed with in the wealthy OECD countries of today is a matter for debate. (Hood 1995: 93.)

According to Hood (1995: 94), the fundamentals of the new NPM-doctrine were/are 'lessening or removing differences between the public and the private sector and *shifting the emphasis from process accountability towards a greater element of accountability in terms of results*' (emphasis mine). The notion of accountability became essential for the new management paradigm. It reflected high trust in the market and private business methods and low trust in public servants and professionals. The reason for the latter was that bureaucrats were perceived as 'budget-maximizers'. Therefore, there was a need to put a price on their activities and evaluate them. Meanwhile, the managerial shift was put into effect with a rhetoric and a language derived from the economics field, with the support of high public officers ('technocrats' or 'accountocrats').

Although there are no single explanations for the emergence of this 'new'[2] management paradigm, it seems that most experts can agree on some general underlying driving forces. These include

- the impact on administrative routines of the recently introduced electronic processing of data and the creation of networks that streamlined the process to lower cost demanded deregulations
- an ideological power struggle between two different political doctrines, liberalism and statism, resulting in the prevalence of the former

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2. Instructive in this context is Hood's comment regarding the indication 'new' in New Public Management. He asserts that the term 'new' does not imply that NPM doctrines appeared for the first time in the 1980s. He draws a parallel to the concept 'New Learning' of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Latin Europe 'discovered' Greek and Latin thinking. In fact, many NPM doctrines are a wealth of repackaged ideas in public administration since its origin (see Hood 1995: footnote 4).

- an adaptation of public administrative systems to the deregulation that economic globalization imposed in both developed and developing countries, with many local variations
- a shift of focus from inputs and processes to a greater extent on outcomes
- emphasis on competence, competition (both within public organisations and between public and private organisations) and accountability, rather than on awkward and impenetrable hierarchies, in combination with performance-based resource allocation
- a transition from unvarying to adjustable modes of payment (fees), and from uniformity in treatment to an emphasis on contract provisions between trustee and beneficiary, service provider and user
- a splitting of central public agencies to separately managed units, which operate together with organisational models inspired by private corporations and the market economy (where everything revolves around standardized production of separate products for (mass) consumption, each of them with its own budget responsibility and managerial autonomy)
- an ever-increasing 'decentralisation' of state power and services, in combination with expansion of user charges and expenditure
- focus on measurable standards and goal fulfilment based on quality indicators and audits entailing a stronger administrative control over the decentralised service authorities
- new forms of blended regulation between public and private sectors have been developed as, for example, in the case of school reform, where old administrative structures are now combined with quasi strategies, in terms of charter schools, vouchers etc. Public education tends to be conceived (and treated) as a private good rather than a collective good! (Nytell 2006, Glor 2001, Whitty & Power 2000, Blomqvist & Rothstein 2000, Hood 1995)

However, there is a note of caution here, especially concerning the link between privatization and marketization. Though, as Marginson (1993) points out, privatization in itself does not always entail market relations, but creates favourable conditions for market activities. Apart from that, the tendency has been firmly rooted in the NPM advocates' belief that the private sector approach is superior to that of the public sector, and so is the case with private choices and decision-making as opposed to of undiscriminating bureaucratic rules.

Efficiency and Quality is the 'logos'

The guiding principles of NPM's worldwide governance reform movement is 'better efficiency', 'more value for (tax) money', 'equity', 'better steering and monitoring/follow up' and 'effectiveness'. Another way to describe the demands expected from public administration/management, and consequently from the NPM, is by referring to the four E's: *Efficiency*, *Effectiveness*, *Equity*, and *Economy* (cf. Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011). Efficiency has some similarities with the concept of effectiveness, though the former is used to designate the way in which administration is conducted to 'do things right', whereas, the latter (effectiveness) concerns 'doing the right things' to provide the intended welfare. Equity is about treating citizens fairly and equally, irrespective of sex, age, or national or cultural ethnicity. Finally, all public administration is financed through general taxation and thus expected to make use of public funds carefully and wisely. Although these four dimensions are conceptually distinct, they have come to be perceived as being related to each other and of constituting two sets, with efficiency being associated with economy, and effectiveness with equity. (Karlsson 2014).

Appropriate methods advocated for the achievement of these 'ideal' public management conditions, among others, are: more competition, privatization and management based on objectives and decentralization. Nevertheless, and this must be kept in

mind, NPM is an ambiguous and strongly ideological concept that is underpinned by a number of different (and sometimes not entirely clear) ideas and theories about what should characterize the governance and management in public organizations and, in our case in the quality of Higher Education.

The techniques that NPM introduced to public management mimicked those applied within the private sector to control activities. From a certain point of view, it seems rational and logical to use methods that ensure profit if the starting point is that public services should also generate profits. However, what if the primary purpose of a public authority, e.g. a HEI, is not to produce profit but other less quantifiable values, i.e. to promote learning and foster reflective and free personalities? How meaningful and adequate are these techniques then deemed? The answer to such a question is certainly reliant on the respondent's ideological horizon. Along with these techniques, some basic assumptions behind NPM stem from theories of New Institutional Economics. The characteristic approach of these theories is based on liberal economic thoughts of the human will to strive for rational choice in all situations, aiming at balancing costs with potential profits in order to choose the option that gives the most profit at the lowest cost. The new institutional approach retains and builds on the neo-classical theory's fundamental assumption of scarcity and competition as the basis of choice that underlies micro-economics: '(It) views economics as a theory of choice subject to constraints; it employs price theory as an essential part of the analysis of institutions; and it sees changes in relative prices as a major force inducing change in institutions' (North 1993). New Institutional Economy theories are often criticized owing to an egoistic view of the human, assuming that individuals are constantly thinking about their own self again and benefits.

Obviously, efficiency-driven thinking is not erroneous in itself and not something that should be attributed only to NPM. Its purpose is noble, and intends to address problems with inefficiency and inadequacy inherent in public administration using

various techniques, e.g. accrual accounting (Karlsson 2014, Lapsley, Mussari & Paulsson 2009, Carlin 2005, Paulsson 2006). The problem is when the pursuit of greater efficiency, as NPM strongly advocates, are indiscriminate and are applied at any cost even on activities/functions included in the welfare state, such as education, culture and health care, up to the point when the whole system collapses. How tricky it would be if the gain in efficiency becomes an end in itself without reference to the content of the service. After all, there are limits on how 'leaned'[3] e.g. an orchestrator may be, or how quickly he/she can perform a music piece of music (if that is even possible), before the musical value is inevitably lost! Conceivably, the emergence of the discourse on quality and its assurance is prompted by this insight.

The use of the concept of quality in the educational world was uncommon before the 1990s. However, it had already been established and frequently used within the private business world and in the sphere of commodity production since the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the need for high-precision machines. Quality was also associated with the development of effective management philosophies and techniques of management and control there is an extensive tradition of dealing with the issue of 'quality' from the first standardization movement at the end of the 19th century[4], for the purpose of determining stan-

3. Cf. lean organisation.

4. Standardization in industry went hand-in-hand with the standardization of workplace procedures. Frederick W. Taylor's studies of how factory workers behave when they perform (time and motion studies), published in 1911 in his Principles of Scientific Management, became influential in industry and coincides with the mass production of interchangeable standard parts (Russell 2005. See also *Standardization*, 2014, 10.12, in *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardization, accessed 23.12.2014). Interchangeable parts are components made to specifications that ensure that they are so nearly identical as to fit into any assembly of the same type. The idea that one such a component can freely replace another, without additional modifications makes one think of today's current educational objectives of developing recognizable (and standardized) skills and competences to ensure

dards to facilitate interchangeability of products and services designed for the same purpose, as well as to facilitating trade among subsequent systems which arise within various enterprise environments, such as ISO (the International Organization for Standards, Management By Objectives,[5] Total Quality Management and the EFQM Excellence Model.[6] The aforementioned quality systems are only a few of many others that provide a framework for implementing effective quality and productivity initiatives, aiming to increase the profitability and competitiveness of organizations, e.g. CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement), QFD (Quality Function Deployment), TQC (Total Quality Control), Balanced Scorecard. However, one can find elements of all these different quality management models in the various guises of the NPM concept which contributes to a relatively vague image to what quality really is, whilst each of these are said to have a clear solution to the problem of quality and how it can be maintained.

It is noted that the concept of quality is barely present in international treaties, which specify the need for educational initiatives. As an indication, a reference to the UNESCO's EFA Global Monitor Report (*Education for All. The Quality Imperative*) could be made, where the six goals adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 implicitly or explicitly integrate a quality dimension (Unesco 2014). The report states at the outset that 'much debate surrounds attempts to define education quality' and that 'quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education'. Although the report ac-

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mobility and employability of the work force. When education systems in different countries provide the same skills, there is no need to expose individuals to new education. Recourses can be more rationally utilized by minimizing both the time and skills required for putting somebody into production.

5. For example, a few of a higher educational institute's objectives are to attract highly qualified faculty, produce well-qualified graduates and provide research of high quality (Cupta 2009).

6. For an overview of the EFQM Excellence model see http://www.efqm.org/sites/default/ files/overview_efqm_2013_v1.pdf

knowledges the difficulty in agreeing on a simple definition of quality, it attempts to find its features and roots in various theoretical traditions of educational thought. By reviewing, inter alia, the humanist approaches, the behaviourist theory and the sociological critiques of education, it concludes that there are two principles which characterize most attempts to define the objectives of education; the first identifies learners' cognitive development as the major explicit objective of all education systems, and the second emphasizes the role of education in promoting commonly shared values and attitudes of responsible citizenship, along with nurturing creative and emotional development. As for the latter objectives, the authors admit that their achievement is much more difficult to assess.

The fact that the notion of quality was rapidly disseminated within public administration makes sense and no one can object that education, which constitutes a major investment outlay in every society, must be of high quality. The problem arises when we attempt to define what quality really is in the context of a Higher Education Institution, and who should define it. Is it the professionals, those involved in teaching and research, or the politicians, who with the assistance of consultants decides upon the criteria and indicators proven in the private business world?

Quality in Higher Education

Much water has flowed under Europe's bridges since the quality regime made its triumphant entry into academia and, particularly, since the Bologna process was staged. The emergence of terms and practices as quality measurements and assurance, assessments of learning outcomes, performance indicators, accreditation procedures, quality audits, internal and external evaluation, and governance by objectives, and the like, are no longer strange birds in the academy's gilded cage. The universities are in the front line of global competition and are forced to comply with demands and expectations for more efficiency, better quality

and excellence. At a European level, the promotion of co-operation in the field of quality assurance is synchronised by The European Network/Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA),[7] which was established in 2000.

Imports of management models from outside into higher education have given rise to a debate about the applicability of quality management principles, methods and tools in a sector with very different traditions and ethos. The opinions were shared. Many were, and to some extent still remain, genuinely sceptical about the appropriateness of the use of industry management theories and practices at universities. Others, however, consider that despite the fact that HEI are not companies, it is conceivable to use the new governance regime principles and instruments 'as long as they were instruments at the service of institutions and their governance and management boards, subject to the institutions academic mission, goals and strategies' (cf. Rosa, Sarrico & Amaral 2012, Stamelos & Kavasakalis 2011).

There is much evidence to suggest that the quality concept so far has been discussed from a management perspective, and therefore is approached instrumentally, with respect to everything that is carried out to ensure quality. What still remains unanswered is the question of the essence of quality. Paradoxically, the increased interest in quality in education, appears in many cases/contexts to be directed towards inventing instruments, which best measure whether current commitments and legislation are followed, instead of what constitutes quality in an educational learning process this is indirectly confirmed by the ENQA that issues Standards and Guidelines for quality evaluation, but

7. Today more than 40 quality assurance agencies are full members of ENQA representing almost all the countries in Europe. For a quality assurance agency or other quality assurance organisation in the field of higher education to be awarded Full Membership, the requirement is for it to have been operating and conducting actual quality assurance activities for at least two years. These include a self-assessment report, made by the agency that applies, and a peer review done on the basis of this self-assessment. (see http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/members/full-members/)

does not prescribe how each institution defines and implements its own quality assurance system. Incidentally, every member has the autonomy to operate its own quality system adapted to their own higher institutions vision, goals and national culture, as long as they comply with the same standards and guidelines. Undoubtedly, quality assurance has caused certain confusion in academia that probably can be attributed to the ambiguity of quality, due to unclear connotations of both standards and excellence. But let us cast a glance over the actual signifier 'quality' and what it stands for.

The word quality derives from the Latin Qualitas and denotes the inner value of something, its nature or attributed characteristics —as opposed to Quantitas that denotes the size, scope, amount, number and the like, which usually refers to a concrete, measurable quantity .

Although quality is difficult to define, there is a belief that it is possible to be examined and assessed. In everyday situations, the concept is relatively straightforward and there is a consensus around some simple criteria for evaluating quality. These criteria are usually an expression of people's practical understanding of more or less common social experiences and are taken for granted. Many have e.g., experiences or conceptions of education and know when it is 'good' and therefore of good quality. The principle that seems to prevail is that 'I have a feeling that this is good because it makes me or others happy and satisfied!'. Intuitive quality assessment is often difficult to convey to outsiders. The situation is different when education quality is discussed in a more systematic way. In such a systematic discussion, the issue of quality is the outcome of deliberative collective processes based on an analysis of the mission, the objectives and the conditions regarding the education offered. Quality cannot clearly be defined in absolute terms. A variety of definitions has been formulated, and each one is usually the result of a negotiation process among different stakeholders' interests and the power relations therein. In service sectors in general, and in higher education institutions in particular, the difficulty of defin-

ing quality is linked to the complex 'product' they work with; it is about' people's actual subjective experiences of learning and the fulfilment of their needs, as well as the questioning of generally accepted knowledge and the production of new knowledge. In attempting a definition of quality, one also touches on the matter of its measurability that is not always feasible in terms of quantifiable indicators. Nevertheless, descriptions of quality as a measurable entity appear in all management designs for the simple reason that it is difficult to talk about things of no visible reference. It is otherwise very awkward to improve on something when you do not know what it is!

As it is fashionable to talk about quality today, quality management in the shape of New Public Management in higher education entails among other things the devolution of accountability from a central to a local level, governance by objectives and development of a quality awareness and culture, launched as a strategy to promote excellence and renewal. The concepts associated with this thinking were meant to raise hopes for greater academic autonomy and freedom, not least for the faculty staff. But early expectations were soon replaced with suspicion and resistance when the consequences of the new management was shown to lead to comprehensive central/national systems for evaluation, quality assessment and accreditation for a very apparent purpose, namely to increase the state's insight and strengthen the central administration control over each operational unit (Askling n.d.). It seems that those who work in the institutions, the 'professionals' and the students, are not the owners of the quality process. They appear more as consumers of quality culture rather than its producers.

Various quality management concepts reveal approaches based on certain principles and core assumptions (truths). Hence, when they are implemented, the expectation of achieving high performance and excellence is high. It is evident that all management models argue that it is part of their 'philosophy' to provide solutions for all organizations 'to reach their objectives effectively and efficiently and to achieve a sustainable competitive

advantage' (see Rosa, Sarrico & Amaral 2012). Although the concept of quality is multi-faceted and can assume many meanings, such as excellence, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, as transformation and as perfection (Harvey & Green 1993), Stamelos and Kavasakalis (2011) raise the power dimension, and the conflict between administrators and the academic community. They argue that this conflict is about control over the academic process through a system of monitoring, reviewing and accountability because of a lack of consensus between these stakeholders.

Developing forms and instruments for institutional quality, without adapting the forms to the relevant content and meaning (the quality?) of academic learning, tends to turn the entire quality evaluation into a mere ritual. When the quality issue was introduced in the early 1990s, with varying degrees of respect or disregard for the academic culture in different national contexts, fabricating forms of quality assessment proved to be more viable than the actual quality of content, as it is not convenient enough to create indicators that capture and measure something that is 'beautiful'. The main feature of the evaluation regime have seemingly been imposed from vested interests outside the academic community and, therefore, the internal 'good discourse' about quality within universities has not been allowed to take its course on its own terms (cf. Askling n.d.)

If the issue of quality does not become a concern for all involved in higher education, neither will a foundation be laid for a new approach to education and its importance for the individual and society today. In such a case, the constant tension between quality as ritual and quality as process of learning, understanding and innovating, i.e. the creation of a new academic ethos and culture, is likely to be accentuated. The core of this relevant question at stake is best illustrated with the following reflection from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*:

> If I have told you these details about the asteroid, and made a note of its number for you, it is on account of the grown-ups and their ways. When you tell them that you have made a new friend,

> they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, '*What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?*' Instead, they demand: '*How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?*' Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him. If you were to say to the grown-ups: '*I saw a beautiful house made of rosy brick, with geraniums in the windows and doves on the roof*', they would not be able to get any idea of that house at all. You would have to say to them: '*I saw a house that cost $20,000*'. Then they would exclaim: '*Oh, what a pretty house that is!*' (p. 11f).

'Quality...you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is'[8]

The aim of the presented overview of the new management philosophy and praxis has displayed some of the NPM's underlying principles, which are implemented in the education sector, namely:

a) The new governance in its practices combines established administrative arrangements with market mechanisms in novel forms of mixed public-private forms of regulations, and thus deviates from a long tradition of freedom and autonomy of and within academia.

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8. 'Quality... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There is nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others... but what's the "betterness"?... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?' (Pirsing 1974/2006: 231).

b) NPM entails a clear, visible and, occasionally, arbitrary control through means of power delegation to certain servants within the organizational hierarchy. To counteract the risk of arbitrariness, the new regime nowadays demands greater accountability from these power-wielding officers.

c) Monitoring of quality performance is usually carried out by quantifying objectives and measuring their fulfilment, focusing on results/outputs rather than on the process itself within the organization.

d) NPM introduced competition in the public sector in the belief that through competition expenses would be kept down, and hopefully produce more 'education' for less money.

e) The university autonomy and self-government is threatened by a system of external evaluations and rankings of courses and programs based on parameters that poorly indicate how good they are in their own right, but at best in comparison with others. The problem is not so much external evaluation, as universities have always engaged external reviewers and experts. The most worrying trend appears to be the gradual marginalization and deprofessionalization of the academic staff within the institutions.

The occurrence of a debate concerning evaluation and quality maintenance in tertiary education coincides with a stronger demand for university education, subsequent massification, internationalisation and competiveness and, ultimately, marketization of the whole sector, and gives rise to new governance ideas within public administration (Harvey & Williams 2010). This process challenges savagely the University's self-image and self-understanding of being independent, and autonomous in nurturing reflective learners with critical thinking – and not only delivering 'learning outcomes' for the sake of employability.

The era when the University was a well-protected bastion for the privileged few has long since passed, giving place to mass education and training institutions. The character of HEI have changed and they face new and unanticipated pedagogical challenges. In the current context of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman &

Mazzeo 2012), as well as uncontrolled globalization processes and rampant consumerism, new phenomena and behaviours are emerging in our culture, with direct impact on the existing processes of 'social production and reproduction' in society. The warning signs of a severe *pedagogy* crisis in all levels of education, especially higher education, are discernible. The information society, intertwined with new technologies, overthrows what we thought hitherto as stable and undisputed –with respect to knowledge and learning processes and, certainly, in relation to our comprehension of what competencies are required by a university teacher in the era of Lifelong Learning and for the creation of a European Higher Education Area (see Γουγουλάκης & Οικονόμου 2014: 12).

The use of the word 'learning', for instance, in designations such as lifelong learning and learning outcomes, at least during the last two decades, has marked an essential shift in educational terminology. Previously, the analysis of educational processes focused more on structures and institutions, while today's discourse stresses on the individual as a person with 'potential to take charge of his/her own learning' (Tuijnman & Boström 2002). On the one hand then, the emphasis on learning from the perspective of the learner inevitably encloses emancipatory features. It is justified by progressive arguments associated with old fashion liberalism, and it is hard to raise objections against them. Individuals need no more to adapt to the educational institutions which they attend; on the contrary, the institutions are subjected to considerable pressure to adapt to the individual student's knowledge, abilities and needs. On the other hand, however, this rationale appears to align itself with the hegemonic premise that education and social welfare are not the responsibility of the community but of the individual. The conclusion is therefore easy to make: *don't blame the system for your failures, but yourself!* (cf. Borg & Mayo 2005: 207)

Numerous objections could be raised concerning the quality assessment models coming from the industrial production of goods. But an undeniable fact that speaks in their favour is that

most of them are proven and can be backed up with good evidence. The problem seems to be that the educational sciences, and especially the *university pedagogy*, in that respect, are undeveloped and therefore at a disadvantage vis-à-vis powerful market forces. It could be that it is not an issue of just two 'schools of thought' when the matter of quality in higher education is discoursed. It might be a matter of the University's shortcomings in convincing the public of its ability to address its own pedagogical and didactical development.

Instead of a conclusion

The university must realize that it is facing increasing pressure from shareholders to find its place and role in a new environment in which the logic of 'buying and selling' prevails. What tools do the universities and the entire education sector possess to deliver quality, in a time when the talk about quality and available resources are disproportionate to each other? The answer can hardly be other than: keep working systematically with internal *quality* to be able to create fertile ground for an academic conversation not limited to bureaucratic routines for compliance to the various indicators of quality. A continuing internal collegial conversation on quality improvement is the most strategic way to regain the initiative for the development of higher education by the academic community for the academic community and the benefit of the whole of society. There is nothing wrong with evaluations which measure the quality of the programs and not the quality of the students. After all, quality cannot possibly exist somewhere 'out there' but it certainly can in the good conversation between wise professionals. It is a matter of professional competence and trust.

Γλωσσική επιμέλεια: *Βασίλης Καραλής*

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