



The assessment of universities in Argentina and Australia: Between autonomy and heteronomy*

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Abstract. The field of university assessment, including quality assurance, is structured by power and conflict, and shaped by technologies of assessment such as self-study by academic units, numerical performance indicators and whole institution evaluation and ranking. In reconstructing and comparing the recent evolution of assessment practices in Argentina and Australia we detect a common neo-liberal approach to assessment, supported by global agencies such as the World Bank. Assessment policies and practices are used to advance neo-liberal agendas, often in contradiction with national traditions in higher education. In both countries more externalised and institution-centred forms of assessment have facilitated the reformed government heteronomy *vis-à-vis* the universities, the rise of business-style management inside them at the expense of participatory governance, the transformation of intellectual autonomy into corporate autonomy, and the reduction of diversity and academic independence. However, some forms of university assessment can be used to facilitate internally-controlled reflection within academic units, directed towards educational objectives.

Keywords: Argentina, Australia, comparative education, globalization, government–university relationship, quality assurance, regulation

Introduction

In the last decade, the assessment of universities, including quality assurance, has become a major focus of regulation, a pattern of regulation that is structured globally, in ways that contribute to convergence across countries. Quality assurance policies emerged and developed in the 1990s as part of a neo-liberal agenda for university modernization, an agenda framed by

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the intersecting relations between global, national, and institutional agencies. In this article, we reconstruct the recent history of university assessment in Argentine and Australian higher education, examining similarities and differences between these two cases.

We conceptualize university assessment in terms of power and conflict, and in terms of technologies that are linked to particular global, national, and institutional networks of power and interest. Drawing on Bourdieu (1983, 1988), we consider the theories, discourse, knowledge, administrative techniques and other practices in university assessment to be a “field.” The values and interests of this field are distinct and are the subject of negotiation among various parties, such as governmental agencies and higher education institutions. The struggle over assessment varies depending on universities’ size, age, mission, and whether they are public or private (Carlino and Mollis 1997; Marginson 1997a, 1999). In a context of negotiation more political than academic (Mollis 1995), the discourse and practices of international agencies, central government, and university actors are often at odds. University assessment is not a neutral search for universal, quantifiable “total quality”; it is constituted through conflict and the exercise of power. The university does not independently establish its own value parameters, yet neither can the government set assessment parameters without regard for the university. The field of assessment, then, is a shifting interplay of (university) autonomy and (governmental) heteronomy.

University assessment is implicated in government efforts to “steer from a distance” using funding incentives, and performance measures and targets (Marginson 1997b). Hence the ambiguity of university quality, both a sign of university autonomy and identity, and a means of government control. Indeed, university quality is no longer primarily a sign of university identity and prestige, it is an interplay of autonomy and heteronomy, channeled through technologies of assessment: self-study and evaluation by academic units and institutions; peer review by expert panels; audit by semi-autonomous agencies; performance indicators that are quantifiable; surveys of “client” groups; and public reporting.

Foucault’s notion of “disciplinary technique” or “technology” (Burchell et al. 1991) helps us conceptualize quality assessment. It is a way of positioning within networks of power, a means by which to norm and thereby inscribe the identities and practices of human subjects and their institutions (Foucault 1977). Technologies join technical knowledge to administrative power. They are tools of government, and domains of academic expertise.

In adopting this view, we diverge from the prevailing perspective on university assessment, which is promoted by comparative scholars, particularly from Anglo-American and Dutch systems of higher education. For

example, El-Khawas (1998) regrets that there is no single theory of effective education or of the key variables in accomplishing quality improvement. Yet that is her goal, as it is for many others. Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) find that quality in higher education is difficult to define in a homogenous way. Yet the efforts of these and other authors from CHEPS has been to promote just such a convergence of quality assurance activity throughout the European Union.

Just as the field of university assessment is criss-crossed by conflicting interests, so the technologies of assessment do not form a singular or unified set. Their reach is incomplete. They cannot achieve a “seamless” closure. For example the dynamics of whole institution evaluation favour summative indicators, simple inter-university comparisons and singular lines of accountability. These are different from the dynamics of locally-controlled assessment in academic units, which enables a close focus on teaching and learning, and admits heterogeneity. Similarly, university quality defined as numerical outcomes is distinct from university quality defined as expert judgement. The various technologies are annexed to often different interests, values, purposes and meanings. Quality in higher education does not exist independently of expert systems of mediation and assessment thereof (Westerheijden et al. 1994). The process of standardisation inherent in the technologies of assessment conflicts directly with the heterogeneous logic of academic expression (van Damme 1999). The point applies not only to the potential for variation within an institution, or between institutions in a national system, but to the potential for cultural difference on the world scale, between different higher education systems. The globalisation of accreditation and quality assurance might facilitate the exchange of knowledge and personnel, but “it is far from certain that a model that suits one country or region also is optimally suited for accommodating an academic environment in another country” (Van Damme 1999, p. 29).

Our argument in this paper is three-fold. First, worldwide convergence around particular systems of university assessment points to the salience of the neo-liberal form of globalisation: in Argentina, we see this expressed through the direct intervention of international agencies such as the World Bank; in Australia, we see this expressed through voluntary imitation coupled with the policy influence of global finance. Second, there is a complex and continuous interplay between global, national, and institutional elements. Assessment is global in impetus, but supervised by national and institutional elements. Third, there are important variations despite the global pattern of convergence. Such variation is shaped by historical-cultural differences, as we explore in our cases. The neo-liberal norm from which such variation diverges is summarised in the World Bank’s publication, *Higher Education:*

The Lessons of Experience (1994). The objectives of neo-liberal reform are to shift the role of government from responsibility for outcomes and quality, to responsibility for regulating the system framework, to encourage competition and market differentiation among institutions, to nurture private institutions, to increase fee charging and other private income at public institutions, to create corporate style universities with professional managers, to install performance assessment, and to shift the identity of the student from pedagogical or democratic subject (as in Argentina) to consumer subject (Zorrilla 1998).

Argentina and Australia

Why do we compare Argentina and Australia? They are both European settler states. They are middle ranking economic powers, and in both the currency is unstable, tethering them to global financial controls. Although they have the material resources to assert a distinctive polity and culture, at times both countries are pulled back by a pattern of international dependence and the derivative character of their governments and elites.

The two countries have similarly sized university systems. However, in Australia public universities receive mixed public and private funding, whereas in Argentina private funding is mostly channeled into the private sector, which enrolls 15% of the student population. In both systems, about one-third of young people enter the university soon after finishing school. Until recently, education was treated largely as a public good and a provider of equal social opportunity. In both countries universities have a history of governing themselves (in the case of Argentina, with violent interruptions by military dictatorship), and of self-accreditation. Thus, although they are being subjected to more externally focused assessment, the autonomous personalities of universities in Argentina and Australia remain a factor to be reckoned with.

University assessment in Argentina

During certain of the democratic periods in Argentine history (particularly 1916–1930, 1958–1966, and after 1983) university regulation was structured by the reformist autonomy established in the University Reform of 1918. Abandoning the oligarchic and elitist political model of the 1880 regime, in 1916 Argentina adopted universal suffrage, reflecting the interests of the rising middle class. Political democratisation affected Argentine universities, with the student movement being integral to reform. Young Reformists achieved a system of university co-governance in which professors,

Table 1. Argentina and Australia compared

	Argentina	Australia
Landmass	2.8 million sq km	7.7 million sq km
Population (31 December 1995)	35.22 million	18.31 million
Gross Domestic Product (1995)	\$294.60 billion	\$472.46 billion
GDP per head (1995)	\$8365	\$25,801
Education as% of total government spending	14.5% (1994)	13.8%
Public spending on education as % of GDP	3.8% (1994)	4.4%
Public spending on universities as % of GDP	0.52%	0.75%
Generated by government	\$1.78 billion	\$2.92 billion
Generated by students and universities	\$0.17 billion	\$2.39 billion
Average annual tuition charge	n.a.	\$2500*
Public funding as% of total funding	91%	55%
Average length of schooling	8.5 years	11 years
Gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education	40% (18–23s)	31% (20–24s)
Total university students	803,563	658,827
Non-university tertiary students	360,000	1,460,000
International students in universities	n.a.	72,183
Annual university graduates	32,387 (1992)	155,275
National universities	36	37
Private universities	43	2
Public enrolment	698,561	658,827
Private enrolment	105,002	c. 30,000
Proportion of students in public sector	86%	96%
University academic staff	98,000 mostly part-time	40,000 full-time equiv.
Staff undertaking research	18,000	33,000
Full-time equiv. average salary full time professor	\$24,000 p.a.	\$55,000 p.a.
Range of organisational cultures in universities	Politicised/corporate	Entrepreneurial/corporate
Government data collection from universities	Partial	Comprehensive
Accreditation	Self-accrediting	Self-accrediting
Quality assurance	Regular evaluations, central guidelines	Compulsory audits to come, central guidelines

All financial data in USD. GDP and GDP per head converted in PPP. Data are for 1997 unless otherwise stated.

*Most students defer their tuition obligations until their incomes reach a threshold level at which repayments begin (this level is currently about USD \$12,000 per year).

students, and graduates each received fixed representation on governing bodies. Moreover, they also sought to ensure university autonomy, teaching staff appointments by examination and competition every seven years, open attendance in all courses, and revised teaching methods. The National Inter-University Council of Rectors (CIN) became the expression of reformism at the national level. The organisational style of Argentine public univer-

sities was sustained for nearly seventy years, until the 1995 Law of Higher Education (Mollis and Feldman 1998; Mollis 1999).

The Law of Higher Education No. 24.521, enacted in 1995, applied to all institutions of higher education and introduced substantial changes into the system. Consistent with the neo-liberal notion of the university as an economic corporation, the Law authorised universities to establish their own salary regime, guaranteed them control of funds they generated, and enabled them to create entities to support financing and enhance relations between the university and the community. Moreover, institutions were empowered to establish an autonomous system of student admissions and graduation. Most importantly for our purposes, the Law established a new system embracing both external and internal forms of institutional assessment. Leaving responsibility for internal assessment to universities, the Law indicated that external assessment would be carried out every six years by the National Commission for University Assessment and Accreditation (CONEAU) or by private organizations recognised for this purpose. All recommendations resulting from institutional assessments were to be made public.

To understand this dramatic shift, we must consider the relationship between national and international agencies, which led to the implementation of a globalised logic in Argentina. The key national agencies were the Ministry of Culture and Education (MCE), particularly the policies and instruments put into practice by the Secretary of University Policies (SPU). This governmental apparatus was re-engineered with the neo-liberal administration of President Carlos Menem (1993–1999), which established a regime of university assessment. The key international agency was the World Bank, which in 1993 prepared an analysis of the University in Argentina.

The discourse of international agencies is neither uniform nor homogenous. In the case of Argentina, there was considerable agreement between the statements of the World Bank (1994) and those of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (Mollis and Bensimon 1999). However, there was one significant variation. The World Bank maintained that quality was impoverished in Argentine higher education and attributed this impoverishment to the autonomy and state subsidising of universities. It suggested constant monitoring of student performance, restricted admission to the university, and the payment of tuition. Free access was linked to the squandering of resources and the politicization of the university (World Bank 1993, p. 89), an old neo-liberal theme (Buchanan and Devletoglou 1970). By contrast, the IDB rejected the use of homogenous and generalising instruments to measure quality. It suggested initiatives that would be “innovative and aspire to achieve change,” and partnerships in initiatives between the State, provincial govern-

ments, and the private sector. Perhaps most important of all, it recognised that diversity and autonomy were inherent to the Argentine university.

In turn, the national government, through the MCE, began to promote university evaluation actively in 1993, signing agreements with half of the national universities for self-assessment and external assessment (MCE 1998, p. 57). These agreements were negotiated between the newly created Secretary of University Policies (SPU), partly in response to earlier difficulties experienced by the MCE in attempting to negotiate institutional agreements. Within a short period of time, the SPU instituted a substantial restructuring of university assessment in Argentina. The unintended effect of the institutional agreements was that in their internal evaluations institutions emphasised their autonomy and demanded additional funding from the central government to carry out their work (Mollis 1994b; Carlino and Mollis 1997). Subsequently the government enacted the 1995 Law, which created CONEAU, to further promote university evaluation. Its mission included: the institutional evaluation of all national, state, and private universities; the accreditation of undergraduate programs in regulated professions; the issuing of recommendations on requests for authorisation of private universities; the recognition of non-governmental university evaluation and accreditation agencies. In order to fulfill these goals, CONEAU carried out a wide variety of tasks (see Table 2). Moreover, a National Postgraduate Accreditation Commission (CAP) was created to accredit postgraduate programs. In addition to supporting institutional evaluation, the government allocated resources to universities for reforms and improvements arising out of evaluation and consistent with neo-liberal modernisation. The mechanism for making these allocations was the Fondo para el Mejoramiento de la Calidad Universitaria (FOMECA – Fund for Improvements in the Quality of Universities), created in 1995. To evaluate and select projects for support, FOMECA used committees of nationally and internationally prominent academics.

The SPU, CONEAU, and FOMECA represent technical, material, and human structures that required a significant investment of resources to establish the regime of university assessment. The creation of these national agencies was underpinned by a loan-based policy agreement between the World Bank and the Argentine government. For example, the World Bank stated that the SPU needed to be made more effective, that universities lacked efficiency incentives, and that “in the absence of accreditation and evaluation mechanisms there is little incentive for quality improvement” (World Bank 1995, pp. 7–8). It directly supported the strengthening of the SPU in planning, information systems and financial allocations, as it also supported the creation of CONEAU and FOMECA. The loan from the Bank covered \$165 million of the total cost of the new projects; it accounted for \$273 million

Table 2. Functions of CONEAU in university assessment in Argentina

I	II	III
External evaluation	Periodic accreditation of undergraduate programs	Periodic accreditation of graduate programs (specialisations, Masters and Doctorates)
IV	V	VI
Evaluation of Institutional projects of new public universities	Evaluations of request for opening new private universities	Evaluation and issue of recommendations on private university evaluation and accreditation agencies (EPEAUS)

in 1995. In short, the World Bank supervised and bankrolled the framing of the key mechanisms of national university assessment, patterning them into a neo-liberal model. The technology of this model, making universities supplicants for support in a competitive process, encouraged universities to shape their activities in the manner favored by the national government and the international agency. All public universities complied, submitting bids.

Not all Argentine activity in the area of evaluation has been externally driven. Prior to the SPU policies, some universities were already implementing pedagogical procedures for institutional quality assessment, working with professors and department chairs. One objective of these efforts was to prepare new curricula for programs that had been unchanged since the period of the military dictatorship (1976–1983). These experiments promoted an innovative atmosphere for educators, authorities, and teachers at such universities as La Plata, Mar del Plata, Cordoba, and Buenos Aires (Coria and Edelstein 1993; Mollis 1995b; Lafourcade 1995; Lucarelli and Otros 1997). These experiments shared one outstanding characteristic: they were a response to the demands of internal actors in the university.

We offer one example, of the continuing experiment in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Buenos Aires, to give a sense of the nature of these quality improvement efforts (Mena 1997; Pascual and Murriello 1996). The Program for Quality Assessment at the Faculty of Economics began in 1994, using internal assessment criteria. It had the full participation of staff. Its first focus was on teaching, with a methodology distinct from that of the top down, quantitative approach of the SPU. An integrated quantitative-qualitative methodology was devised, and teachers and students

were surveyed in nine subject areas. As Pascual and Murriello (1997, p. 29) observed, "Quality assessment . . . is in need of qualitative criteria intrinsic to the academic task, as defined by the community as a whole in accordance with the academic mission of the institution." The outcome of the process, then, was not external disciplining or norming of the fields quantitatively, according to some global neo-liberal norm. Rather, it was an assessment sensitive to the context of teaching that was geared to "formative" goals, to helping faculty and programs improve in realistic ways informed by the objectives and values of the academics themselves. In short, the possibility of developing alternative, local models of university assessment exist and are being undertaken, even in the midst of a powerful, dominant, globally shaped pattern of action.

University assessment in Australia

Australian universities were structured on the British model, funded by government and independent in teaching, learning and research, with governing councils that included a minority of government nominees. Academic freedom was equated with institutional autonomy. Academic standards were regulated informally at the discipline level. The professoriate was dominant: students lacked the central role accorded to them in Argentine reformism. In the 1950s and 1960s mass education enabled government funding to shape the outer development of institutions and create a growing administrative structure inside universities. Although there was a partial shift in control from collegial professoriate to full-time managers, the collegium was still strong, partly due to the expanded national investment in basic science, which legitimated academic independence (Foster and Varghese 1996). While the universities were legally constituted by regional (State and Territory) governments, the national government became the main funder and policy maker, and in deference to institutional autonomy, national funding was administered by an "arms length" commission appointed by government. (By contrast, the non-university colleges of advanced education (CAEs) were subject to State government accreditation and course approval, with cultures akin to a government department.) In the "student power" epoch of 1968–1975, the role of students and junior staff in university governance was increased, again somewhat weakening the senior professoriate.

In the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s funding, system design and institutional cultures were radically transformed. The changes were driven by a reforming minister, and a new Department of Education Employment and Training (DEET) which replaced the arms length commission reckoned too sympathetic to institutional independence. The minister and DEET played a role akin to that of the SPU in Argentina. Similarly, just as

the creation of new universities in Argentina destabilised the existing power-blocs, so a dramatic resetting of the institutional map did so in Australia. As the Argentine Act established the basis for self-supporting universities, so did changes to the Higher Education Act, including the partial deregulation of fee-charging, in Australia. As in Argentina, policies and institutional models were shaped by the neo-liberal imagination.

Unlike Argentina, international agencies did not play a direct role. However, the national government was attuned to global policy trends in Anglo-American heartlands, and one of its early objectives was to open up the universities to global currents, especially market pressures. Self-globalisation became one of the driving forces of institutional autonomy.

The new governmental policies were announced in two successive reports (Dawkins 1987, 1988). They planned a 60% expansion in graduates over the period 1988–2001, abolished the distinction between university and non-university higher education and created a unitary university sector, restructured university-government relations on the basis of university financial autonomy and “steering from a distance” by government, promoted a mixed publicly and privately funded system, centralised most research funding based on measured research performance and national priorities, encouraged institutional efficiencies and professionalised management, and standardised data collection and reporting. At first, university assessment was not part of the agenda, except in the emphasis on performance-related data. When the government devised whole-of-institution assessment in the early 1990s, it focused on management efficiencies and marketisation. Later, at the end of the 1990s, it announced a national system of quality assurance, triggered by international competition and concerns about the market image of Australian universities.

In 1988 the government announced that in future all institutions would be designated as universities and funded to conduct research, provided that they met minimum size thresholds. All colleges were required to upgrade to university status, or merge with existing universities. The number of public higher education institutions fell from 72 to 40, with 36 (later 37) doctoral universities. Average institutional size tripled. The institutional restructuring and mergers, increased fund-raising, and new focus on external relations, all led to the expansion and professionalisation of the senior executive layer in universities.

The government established closer relations with this emergent leadership, especially in new universities. Rather than dealing with the sector at arms length and en bloc as before, the government now conducted one-to-one annual negotiations over funding and policy with each individual institution. It used these negotiations not only to reach formal agreement on

planning targets, but to secure compliance on other items. Project funding was offered for competitive bidding between institutions, so that they began to reshape their activities in conformity with selection criteria. In the post-merger 'Unified National System', all universities were funded on the same formulae and were free to bid for project funding. However, there were substantial ongoing differences between universities in economic resources, academic prestige and social power. At the same time, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, once a united front of 17 research universities, became politically fragmented. The one-to-one character of the government's dealings undermined the older universities' capacity to mount a collective defence of traditional academic values. While universities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, the Australian National University and Western Australia sustained their discipline-based academic cultures, all universities needed government funding and were subject to the new heteronomy.

The neo-liberal construction of the national system as an inter-institutional *competition* contrasted with earlier Australian approaches that had been collaborative and egalitarian. Previously, all universities had been seen as equivalent in standard, and monies distributed according to student numbers. Now, institutions were ranged against each other for some government funding, most private funding, and international and postgraduate students. Competition reinforced the divide and rule heteronomy; and fed into the neo-liberal ethic of corporate responsibility whereby good management – not academic excellence – was the lynchpin of university 'performance' and competitive position. Thus university autonomy was reshaped in terms of corporate culture. Consistent with this, the next round of policy called for the further corporatisation of university governance (Hoare 1995), and the extension of market competition and client relations (West 1998).

The new heteronomy subordinated independent academic authority, harnessing universities to the "knowledge economy". To accomplish this, the government worked through university leader-managers. They were the mediating element that linked government policy to academic work. Negotiations with government, and the standards and requirements routinely imposed by government, shaped managers' decisions, perspectives and sense of the possible. In turn leader-managers imposed performance requirements on 'their' academic units. Junior managers, such as faculty deans, did the same further down the line. An explicit aspect of national policy was to foster university leadership. Universities had to prepare strategic plans, and blueprints for research management. They received extra funds for training managers, restructuring administration, and improving internal communications and data systems. Policy documents polemicised in favour of executive speed and efficiency, and against representative governance of staff and

student (Dawkins 1988; Hoare 1995). Universities were urged to reduce governing councils to boards of directors. Though internal representation survived, council sizes were reduced, and traditional collegial bodies such as academic boards and discipline-based faculty boards became marginal, supervising academic standards, but losing involvement in resource matters, in which power was concentrated in the hands of full-time managers. Collegial bodies found themselves responding to agendas created elsewhere. For their part, university Vice-Chancellors were more wary of discipline-based organisation. They saw it as an obstacle to the free movement of functions, resources and personnel, and a potential rallying point for collegial academic values. They favoured cross-disciplinary schools and research centres instead of discipline-based departments; and measurements of research performance which “flattened” out disciplinary specificities (Marginson and Considine 2000).

By the second half of the 1990s corporate organisation had been secured in every Australian university, coexisting uneasily with academic cultures. The decisive element was the power of executive leaders, drawn mostly from academic ranks but imbued with a new spirit of business enterprise and continuous re-engineering (Marginson and Considine 2000). Manager-leaders adopted generic technologies of quality assurance, drawn from outside education, in which the content of the “product” was less important than the competitive position of the firm itself.

With the above changes came an increased emphasis on self-generated revenues, and on international markets. Australian higher education was free of domestic tuition fees from 1974 to 1987. In 1987, universities were permitted to charge fees for selected postgraduate vocational courses, and encouraged to sell services to industry, and the first full fee-paying international students enrolled. From 1989 other students were required to pay a standard tuition charge in the form of an income-contingent loan. The proportion of university income that derived from students rose from less than 1 per cent in 1986 to 33 per cent in 1998. Yet, the financial position of the sector was deteriorating due to the decline of public funding, which stimulated greater commercial activity and pursuit of international students.

An orientation to the international marketplace foregrounded marketing, and elevated business models of quality assurance. It probably quickened the spread of student evaluation of staff. The decline in public resources was also a stimulus to the quality movement. For institutional managers and government, quality assurance could be used to shift attention away from funding while sustaining institutional reputation. Strong universities used assessment to assert their competitive position; and once enough were committed, the rest had to follow.

Table 3. Financing and resources in Australian higher education, 1983 and 1990–1999

	1983	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Government funding as a % of university income	91	68	67	65	60	62	59	58	56	52	49
Total number of international students	n.a.	24,998	29,630	34,076	37,152	40,494	46,187	53,188	62,974	72,183	83,047
Ratio students to academic staff (effective full-time)	11.7	14.2	15.1	14.7	14.6	14.7	15.0	15.6	16.8	17.5	18.3

Source: DETYA 1999b and other years. Staffing data exclude casual labour.

A related policy change was increased emphasis on assessment. In the second half of the 1980s individual universities started their own evaluation schemes, affected by quality assurance in UK universities, and “total quality management” and related technologies in international and Australian business. At the same time, the national government initiated national reviews of six disciplines, and introduced funding for pedagogical and administrative innovations. The National Priority (Reserve) Fund supported projects installing quality assurance systems; and the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) allocated monies to projects designed to improve teaching quality and introduce new technologies. In these schemes the central committees governing each scheme selected the particular bids, and set the terms under which bidding took place. With a neo-liberal logic, they secured heteronomous control over autonomous academic initiatives, while upholding innovation and self-management.

In 1990 the government began to consider a national approach. Its advisory committee, the Higher Education Council, issued several papers on quality, which focused on external “stakeholders” and students. These papers smoothed the way for a national system of audit. In 1992 the government established the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE), chaired by a vice-chancellor, with six out of nine members drawn from the sector, two from industry and one from government. The Committee conducted three successive audits of all institutions in 1993–1995: the first on teaching and research, the second specialising in teaching, and the third in research and community service. It had a major impact on university activities. The whole institution method was integral to its influence, as its chair later stated (Harman 1998, p. 343). Institutions were ranked and the results were published, with major implications for university reputations.

Moreover, funds were allocated by rankings: \$56 million in 1993, \$48 million in 1994 and \$33 million in 1995. When two leading universities, Sydney and Monash, were allocated to level 2 in 1993, rather than the level 1 as expected, it was a warning to others that their competitive position was at risk. The CQAHE used two criteria in ranking institutions: the quality of outcomes in teaching and research, and the quality of quality assurance processes. The latter one drove the extension of an assessment culture throughout each university, while ensuring that it would be controlled by managers rather than academic units, and focused on institutional interests rather than pedagogies and research *per se*. Further, by highlighting the student evaluation of teaching, the measurement of quantitative outcomes, and strategic planning, the CQAHE encouraged the spread of these methods.

After three years the audits were discontinued. Subsequently the government called for universities to include quality assurance and quality improvement in their strategic planning, and integrate these processes into their daily institutional lives, though compliance was not audited. Emphasis was placed on reporting arrangements and institution-wide approaches to performance management (DETYA 1999a). The government also published the results of annual surveys on graduate employment and graduate satisfaction with courses (by institution and course); it also published data on research incomes and outputs.

Despite such developments, Australia still lacked a single standard of Australian qualifications for the purposes of international marketing. A number of developments propelled the Australian government towards a national system. Multilateral bodies and agencies were grappling with issues of inter-country recognition of qualifications and student mobility. Australia was negotiating with European countries over mutual recognition of qualifications. The UK and New Zealand, competitors of Australian universities, created national quality assurance systems. Collaborative international networks such as the University of Melbourne-led Universitas 21, in which Australian universities “benchmarked” their courses against those of partner universities, legitimated global standards-setting.

Another driving force for standardising the system was the potential of on-line education. Some Australian institutions began negotiating with non-government accrediting agencies such as the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE). However, many felt that a government-backed system of quality assurance would provide stronger market protection for the Australian “brand” in the international marketplace.

In December 1999 the government announced the formation of a Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA), to conduct audits of quality in self-accrediting universities every five years, monitor quality assur-

ance processes, and advise the States on accreditation requirements. Non-university providers, together accounting for about 25,000 higher education students, were required to secure accreditation and course approval from State governments (Harman and Meek 1999, pp. 21–24). The whole institution approach of the 1993–1995 audits was maintained. The Agency would be governed by a board of nine, drawn from national and State governments (six), two representative from self-accrediting universities and one from other providers.

The national Minister stated that the responsibility of governments was “to provide a robust quality assurance and accreditation framework” which “places the responsibility for the quality of provision on individual universities” (Kemp 1999). In the neo-liberal vision neither a democratically-elected government, nor self-governed universities, would determine university “quality”. Education was a commodity, the production of which had to be managed. Thus, the government announced that the collection of performance-related data from universities would be extended to include the results of a work-related ‘graduate skills test’, generic to all disciplines: assessment not for a pedagogical culture, but a utilitarian consumer culture.

Conclusion

In the last ten years, economic globalisation has underpinned experiments in university assessment and control within the neo-liberal framework. Governments are re-engineering their systems to monitor and control academic life. Simultaneously, in many countries there has been a reaction among universities and intellectuals with a history of autonomy, demanding forms of accreditation and assessment independent of government and oriented toward improving the quality of teaching, learning and research. Within the field of university assessment, we find significant similarities between Argentina and Australia. In both cases, national government has reconstituted the field of assessment, formerly the preserve of academic authorities and other internal constituencies. The systematising and generalising of assessment is part of adapting higher education to the neo-liberal economy. And such activity in national government is shaped by global tendencies and agencies, openly so in Argentina.

The new governmental heteronomy has subordinated institutional autonomy without abolishing it. The terms of autonomy have shifted from an education-centred and participatory culture (especially in Argentina) to the culture of self-managing corporate institutions led by professional managers (especially in Australia). In the practices of assessment, in both countries there appears to be a weakening of specifically pedagogical objectives,

as assessment takes the form of whole institution approaches controlled by managers rather than discipline or course-based approaches shaped by teachers and students. Accountability objectives tend to dominate improvement objectives.

There are also differences between the two countries. Culturally Australia is more closely attuned to Anglo-American neo-liberalism than is Argentina. As a result, the commercialisation of Australian public institutions has been internally driven by managers as well as externally shaped by government. Neo-liberal reform began earlier in Australia, and has gone further. University-government relations were restructured on the basis of "steering from a distance", whereby greater heteronomy coincided with corporate institutional autonomy. The old academic freedom was infringed not by government, but by local managers adept at shifting the basis of autonomy from university-as-knowledge to university-as-corporation. Autonomy was relocated within heteronomy. By contrast, in Argentina professional management is less developed and there is a much more developed tradition of participatory governance. There is a strong Argentine commitment to autonomy grounded in the critical independence of the university. The national government has utilized assessment practices as instruments of heteronomy, promoting a culture of continuous improvement and market responsiveness that is consistent with the neo-liberal vision of the university as self-managing corporation, but is hostile to national traditions in Argentina. Yet the Argentine government does not operate as efficiently and subtly as it has in Australia: the emergent neo-liberal culture is consequently incomplete, central government agendas are contested, and assessment is being shaped by internally-determined forms. One other major difference between the countries is in the nature of international influences on higher education assessment practices. Recent events in university assessment in Argentina have been propelled by a leading actor on the international stage, the World Bank, which sees university assessment as one medium for the development of corporate management and performance measures. By contrast, in Australia the principal international influence has been institutions' financial incentive to play in international markets and the nations' desire to compete in those same markets, which require standardised corporate forms, including quality assurance.

Despite such differences, universities in both Argentina and Australia have experienced the insertion of powerful performance assessment regimes. One sign of the new hegemony in assessment is the skewed terms of debate about its merits. Assessment is scarcely capable of political challenge from internal agents, for to resist the technologies of assessment is to appear to stand against accountability itself. Yet when the technologies of assessment "flatten

out” the historical features of a national system, such as reformism in university governance in Argentina and cross-system equity and inter-university cooperation in Australia, we need to ask whether it is desirable to jettison these features in favor of standardisation. If countries in the ambiguous location of the Anglo-American periphery are to be proactive, a capacity for distinctive identity and originality is essential.

The foregoing analysis suggests possible areas for further research. First, in both countries much the same technologies are in use. This enables us to reach preliminary findings about the relationship between technologies and power. Some technologies – for example whole institution approaches, system-wide performance indicators and especially, the use of rankings, are more consistent with heteronomy. Other technologies, such as discipline-level assessment, are better attuned to independent forms of academic autonomy. Such connections between assessment practices and power relations between states and institutions merit further study.

Second, the relationship between assessment practices, and improved teaching and learning, has received little attention. A cross-country study might be enlightening. To what extent do the technologies promoted by international and national agencies affect local practices of teaching and learning, in either positive or negative ways?

Third, there is a question posed by Valimaa and Kontinnen (1998, p. 10) in relation to Finland, which also relates to the cases of Argentina and Australia. Does the new regime of assessment lead to changes in social relations within higher education? We suspect that it does. For example, there are now specific layers of professionals dedicated to “quality” and its technologies, with distinct work practices, training regimes, journals and books, dealings with government and universities. There is also the interplay between assessment and the professionalisation of university management. These offer much scope for further research.

Finally, we have argued that in the recent history of Argentine and Australian higher education, heteronomy is uppermost. Nevertheless, we emphasise the ambiguous potential of assessment, its capacity to also serve the ends of pedagogies and internal constituencies. For example, in the assessment carried out at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Buenos Aires, “quality” is defined by culture and the institutional mission of the university, through teaching as well as research and performance. Here the evaluative view of the community as a whole (teachers, students, researchers, administrators and educators), reflecting on practice, constitutes legitimate instruments for achieving institutional improvements. Management becomes less a means of internal control and more a useful adjunct of the educational process. In this context we can begin to rethink the views of such international

agencies as the Inter-American Development Bank. Somewhere between the heteronomy produced by the regulatory framework and its monitoring agents, and the autonomy of the institutions, stand the actors, the only subjects able to assume control over conflicts in the field of assessment, in order to improve their institutions and help them grow.

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