Is quality assurance a European profession?

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New professionalism in academia

- Professionalisation of academic leadership: “hybrid professionals“ (Fitzgerald/Ferlie 2000) or “academic bureaucratisation“ (Coccia 2009)

- Expansion/Professionalisation of university administration: evaluation, employability managers, equal opportunity etc.

The emergence of new occupational groups around universities: i.e. specialised management consultants, quality assurance agencies
• What is „European“ quality assurance?
  – European evaluation and accreditation agencies as „buffer organisations“
  – Quality assurance: a powerful steering device
• Research Design
• Analysis
  – National Level
  – European Level
• Conclusions
What is „European“ quality assurance?
• 1990s: Introduction of quality assurance in European higher education.

• „Buffer organisations“ (Neave 1989) or „intermediary agencies“ (Braun 1993) find themselves in the midst of the revolving relationship between state and public institution (New Public Management debate).

• The four „tasks“ of quality assurance:
  – Control for the implementation of Bachelor/Master
  – Accountability check of the public institution
  – Provide information for the public subvention (or not) of study programmes
  – Optimizing teaching quality
Quality assurance: a steering device

- Accreditation and evaluation agencies have a powerful stance in the regulation of higher education provision.

- Yet their working conditions are characterised by strong power asymmetries…

research question…
Research Design
Research question

• What is the professional status of this new occupational group?
• Are we dealing with an emerging profession?

Data

• A case study of the German evaluation and accreditation market 1990-2008
• Document analysis of national and European policy documents related to the provision of quality assurance for higher education (1998-2010)
• Interviews with national and European quality assurance experts (2006-2008)
Theoretical framework
„Ideal type“ professionalisation

• „Ideal type“ professionalisation (Freidson 2003, Wilensky 1964):
  – Self regulation
  – Formal and codified knowledge base/monopoly
  – Ethics of professionalism

What kind of professionalisation (if any) do we find in the case of European quality assurance?
Analysis
The national level: Constrains and resources of quality assurance

- A European patchwork of quality assurance „regimes“:
  - Laisser faire: „market type“ quality assurance (Germany)
  - Directive: „state agency“ (Spain, Sweden, Poland)
  - Semi-professional agency (Austria)

- Common denominators:
  - **No political leverage** with regard to ministerial regulations
  - Problematic acceptance **in the academic community**: Academics as gatekeeper to the expansion of other occupational groups in the academic sphere
The national level: Academic „resentment“ towards quality assurance

• Tradition of „academic freedom“ clashes with external control

• What kind of specialised expertise do quality assurance „professionals“ possess?
  – An „intuitive“ approach to the development of professional standards and routines
  – The specialised expertise lies with the „peer“

• Who becomes active in quality assurance?
  – „Failed academics“
  – High turn over rate between agencies and within the sector
The national level: Is there place for yet another autonomous actor?
• In 2003, quality assurance became one of the main policy incentives within the European reform process:
  – **Politization and formalization** of quality assurance in the Bologna process (ENQA association)
  – Emergence of **professional standards**
  – **Creation of a register** for European quality assurance agencies

• political leverage,
• codification of the knowledge base,
• and social closure

Do European quality assurance agencies aim for professional status?
Is quality assurance a European profession?
Fragility of the political situation…

- No direct political impact on national/regional legislation
- No political visibility
- Fragility of the overarching political process (Bologna), that starts to loose its momentum...

Case study: Quality assurance politics in Europe and Germany
Standards of „professionalism“
A content analysis of the „European standards and guidelines for quality assurance“

- **Technocratic requirements:**
  No room „creativity“ or „discretion“ (Larson 1977)

- **Standards without „norms“ (Durkheim):**
  „Professionalism“ for the sake of „credibility“
  – „Professionalism“ as **exogeneous value**
  – No standardization of **endogenous values/behavioural concepts** (i.e. „responsibility“)
Is Quality assurance a European profession?

Social closure

Social closure: what for?

• Creation of a register for quality assurance agencies to regulate access to a European market for quality assurance provision

• Yet: most countries do not allow for non national quality assurance provision!

A register to regulate access to a market that does not exist?
What kind of professionalization for European quality assurance?

• No means of professionalization at the national level:
  – Dependency from the ministry
  – Problematic acceptance on behalf of the professional client organisation

• At the European level:
  – Politics of „standardization“ (Brunsson/Jacobsson 2000)
Thank you for your attention!

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