'Improving ratings': audit in the British University system

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This paper gives an anthropological comment on what has been called the 'audit explosion', the proliferation of procedures for evaluating performance. In higher education the subject of audit (in this sense) is not so much the education of the students as the institutional provision for their education. British universities, as institutions, are increasingly subject to national scrutiny for teaching, research and administrative competence. In the wake of this scrutiny comes a new cultural apparatus of expectations and technologies. While the metaphor of financial auditing points to the important values of accountability, audit does more than monitor—it has a life of its own that jeopardizes the life it audits. The runaway character of assessment practices is analysed in terms of cultural practice. Higher education is intimately bound up with the origins of such practices, and is not just the latter day target of them. © 1997 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

The pedagogic revolution in the second half of the 18th century that culminated in new ways by which to examine university students was a Europe-wide phenomenon. At one university after another, although apparently without direct contact between them, it became the practice to assess students on the basis of written as well as oral work. One might ask whether there is a similar global revolution underway, at the end of the 20th century, involving practices I coalesce under the rubric of 'audit'. There seems a wide consensus about the need for new forms of assessment, although here it is no longer the student who

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is the subject of such scrutiny but the universities themselves. The key word is accountability.

In contemporary English, the concept of accountability evokes not only the financial keeping of accounts as a matter of good practice but a recent wave of more general exhortations to good practice in the conduct of academic affairs. My own University (Cambridge) was subject to an Academic Audit in 1992 by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, a national body of university representatives. The body charged by the Government to oversee the universities, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), conducts national exercises that also have an auditing role, such as the Teaching Quality Assessment, which scrutinizes subject areas on a rolling basis, and the four-yearly Research Assessment Exercise, of which the most recent was in 1996. These flourish within a burgeoning climate of quality evaluation.

However local and particular the effects of HEFCE in Britain, university academics are caught up in a phenomenon of global potential, both within and beyond Europe. Indeed there is a sense in which new protocols about professionalism and the rights embedded in promulgations of good practice have a distinctly American flavour. Yet 'human accounting', as it is called, did not begin there—we might say as Europeans that we are borrowing back earlier exports. It is exactly such borrowings and crossing of domains on which I want to comment. I do so by focusing on events which could seem parochial (my home institution, which includes both the Department of Social Anthropology within Cambridge University and Girton College of which I am a member), but it will be in their very details that my account may seem familiar or, for that matter, unfamiliar. It will be a matter for future investigation whether this is indeed another pan-European phenomenon or simply an English complaint.

Improving the examination system

At the annual congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1864, Emily Davies argued the case for putting on to a permanent basis the experimental admission of school girls to public examinations.[1] Whereas other speakers dwelt on the consequences of competition between men and women, she dwelt instead on the moral benefits secondary instruction would bring to girls whom society had brought up, as she said, to be mere elegant triflers. In referring thereby to the improvement of girls' education, she was improving on the ambitions of the recently founded Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate itself. The syndicate's aim was to provide assessment through written examinations 'as a key means of raising standards in secondary schools of all kinds'.[2] This set the scene for Emily Davies' aspirations; a decade later she was laying the foundation of Girton College, then for women students, with the conviction that the students had to commit themselves to nothing less than the full Cambridge examination system sat by men students.

We should speak perhaps of the *opportunity* to be examined rather than the *right* to it. Women 'had to be seen to do exactly the same things, within the same timetable, as men' (Ref. 2, p. 37). And why were examinations so important? Because they were impartial instruments for making levels of attainment visible. They constituted, in Emily Davies's own words (Ref. 1, p. 31), an 'external agency' which could sustain teachers by being able to 'at once test and attest the soundness of their work'.

Now the authority of that external agency had itself to be created. Why were written examinations the vehicle for the formal testing of knowledge and ability in the first place? Some of the answer is given by an educationalist, Hoskin, who, rather appositely as it will turn out, currently holds a post in Management Accounting, and I draw freely on his observations.[3]

This is where the story begins in Europe. The development of written examinations for the Cambridge mathematical tripos in the 1760s was the English contribution to what was going on all over Europe: improving the oral scrutiny of students by demanding written answers as well. Cambridge colleges played their part. The student's result was interpreted as a mark of institutional as well as personal success, which led to colleges attempting to prove that their candidate was best. This culminated in 1792 in a proposal that all answers be marked numerically, so that, in Hoskin's words, 'is and ought will be brought into proper alignment, and the best candidate will be declared Number One' (Ref. 3, p. 273). A particular performance became a register of a general truth about the candidate's ability. This application of measurement combined three already existing but distinct practices that between them put into the place the system as we know it. The idea of an examination as the formal testing of human activity joined with quantification (that is, a numerical summary of attainment) and with writing, which meant that results were permanently available for inspection.

With measurement came a new morality of attainment. If human performance could be measured, then targets could be set and aimed for. What is became explicitly joined with what ought to be. This new morality was epitomized in the concept of improvement. 'Improvement' is wonderfully open-ended, for it at once describes effort and results. And it invites one to make both ever more effective—a process from which the tests themselves are not immune: measuring the improvement leads to improving the measures.* 'Not only new targets but new kinds of targets may at any moment be constituted out of the debris of past successes and failures' (Ref. 3, p. 266, emphasis removed).

The very concept of 'improvement' already presages this. Over the 16th century, the term had shifted from referring to land from which rent (profit) was taken to the capacity of all sorts of devices to bring benefit to the user or owner. It thus came to acquire the connotation of enhancement. It is a well known feature of language change that meanings spread out from their original location

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and, by the end of the century, it began to be used in its modern sense of improving the mind. However meanings do not just spread out from a source—they can also loop back. The development in turn of more positive attitudes towards land enclosure led in the mid-17th century to the idea of 'improvement', in its new sense, being borrowed back. So what had once been a neutral register of the fact that a piece of land was profit-bearing, now meant land capable of yielding more because more had been done to it. The action of making something better, and thus *increasing* its value, elevating it in the sense of enhancement, had been built irrevocably into the term improvement.

When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. The more a 2.1 examination performance becomes an expectation, the poorer it becomes as a discriminator of individual performances. Hoskin describes this as 'Goodhart's law', after the latter's observation on instruments for monetary control which lead to other devices for monetary flexibility having to be invented. However, targets that seem measurable become enticing tools for improvement. The linking of improvement to commensurable increase produced practices of wide application. It was that conflation of 'is' and 'ought', alongside the techniques of quantifiable written assessments, which led in Hoskin's view to the modernist invention of accountability. This was articulated in Britain for the first time around 1800 as 'the awful idea of accountability' (Ref. 3, p. 268).

Higher education in this country has somewhat belatedly joined the long line of public institutions that have, over the last 20 years, been subject to 'human accounting', and all that means in terms of new management procedures and financial targets. Yet if one thought that the practices of accountability with which British universities are now familiar—such as the quality assessment exercises introduced into higher education about a decade ago—had come out of the commercial world with its protocols of bookkeeping and calculations of resources, one would be only half right. Accountability did not (Hoskin argues) appear in British work organizations until the 19th century. There were accounting practices in pre-19th century business, but financial and human performance were not combined. So where did the combination come from? We already have the answer. Commerce and business learnt human accounting from what was going on in education itself. Those 'writing, grading and examining practices, were inventions not of business but of the educational world' (Ref. 3, p. 268), and specifically the university world of Cambridge and, not long after, Oxford. One eventual result of those new systems of university examination was the commercial ethos of accountability.

Here, then, we have just the same kind of extension and return, or loop through another area of activity, as in the modern formulation of the idea of improvement. It is a beautiful example of what anthropologists would call cultural replication. Values cross from one domain of cultural life to another and then, in altered form, back again. Now Hoskin has described the first two stages of such a trajectory—from education into the accountancy practices of the business world. I simply complete the movement for the late 20th century by

commenting on the way they loop back into higher education itself. Such practices both return with new meanings from this other domain, to reinvigorate the old, while in another sense they never come back to their original source.[4] Universities have not stood still in the meantime. In this borrowing, the transfer across domains is happening at the same time as each domain also follows its own history. So this borrowing back has not been to the benefit of the examination system as such. Written examinations have changed little since they were first instituted; however, the whole context in which they are administered has. Something else had become the object of examination.

Withing one trajectory will be numerous others. The return, we might say, has happened (at least) twice. Accountancy in its professional sense informs modern practices of financial management, and one of the instruments of management is the *audit*. If principles coming out of education contributed to the development of standardized auditing procedures, these procedures in turn became routine for financial auditing in universities and colleges like anywhere else. Academic institutions were re-invented as financial bodies. But it is the more recent return that concerns me, and here accountancy becomes linked to a more general idea of accountability, and with it an expansion of the domain of auditing. Speaking of events in Britain over the last two decades, Power[5] refers to the audit explosion; whatever had been set in train with the practice of written and numerically graded examinations returns as an audit in a new and expanded sense. Education finds itself drawn into the rather bloated phenomenon I am calling the *audit culture*. Audit culture is audit enhanced.

The enhanced auditing of performance returns not to the process of examining students, then, but to other parts of the system altogether. What now are to be subject to 'examination' are the institutions themselves—to put it briefly, not the candidates' performance but the provision that is made for getting the candidates to that point. Institutions are rendered accountable for the quality of their provision.

This applies with particular directness in Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), which scrutinizes the effectiveness of teaching—that is, the procedures the institution has in place for teaching and examining, assessed on a department by department basis within the university's overall provision. This is a smaller element in the research assessment, and indeed the emphasis of the two exercises differs. TQA focuses on the means by which students are taught and thus on the outcome of teaching in terms of its organization and practice, rather than the outcome in terms of students' knowledge. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), on the other hand, also carried out on a departmental (cost centre) basis, specifically rates research outcome as a scholarly product. Yet here, too, means are also acknowledged. Good research is supposed to come out of a good 'research culture'. If that sounds a bit like candidates getting marks for bringing their pencils into the exam, or being penalized for the examination room being stuffy, it is a reminder that, at the end of the day, it is the institution as such that is under scrutiny. Quality of research is conflated with quality of research

department (or centre). 1792 all over again! In both exercises, the institution (whether department or university) is given a distinct presence over and above the performance of individuals. In particular, the institution as a whole is accredited with aims and objectives and its capacity to meet them.

The borrowing back and forth between educational assessment and business accounting can be taken as a true story—it could also be an allegory. I am thinking of it as an allegory for the relationship between auditing and higher education that can also be considered in an expanded sense. If we look not just at the institutions of higher education but at certain trends in scholarship, that is, at the *content* of what is taught and researched, in some areas at least we shall find fertile mulch for the late 20th century audit culture. Audit has not just come in from outside; it also belongs here.

I talk of the audit of audit culture in order to draw attention to some of the runaway effects of this process that began, so to speak, with the pristine aims of educational improvement. An anthropologist would argue that ideas can acquire a momentum of their own. In this case, improvement is not just any old idea—it summons the very momentum to which it refers.

Organizational models

In addition to the Higher Education Funding Council's exercises, which promote the British policy-driven division of university activity into research and teaching through the simple device of a divided funding formula, are the activities of a further body, the Higher Eduation Quality Council. The Higher Education Quality Council contributes to the maintenance and improvement of quality in the universities, a company limited by guarantee and owned jointly by CVCP (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals) among others. It took over responsibility of academic audit from the CVCP itself. (The CVCP had carried out the 1992 Academic Audit of the University referred to above. Note that the 'academic' in 'academic audit' here refers to the attainments of the institution as an institution.) The purpose of the Higher Education Quality Council is to verify whether or nor universities, as overall institutions, have effective means of achieving their educational objectives. All three forms of quality assessment are due to come under the aegis of a national body, which is now being put together (March 1997) by the Joint Planning Group for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The proposal is that, in addition to subject reviews (as in the present teaching and research assessments), there should be 'an institution-wide review' every five years.

While the Secretary of State for Education and Employment intends this integration to reduce the burden of external scrutiny, the chances are that it will devolve those burdens down. Audit mechanisms will be reproduced, like so many internal quality control bodies, within institutions. But what kind of mechanisms will they be and what kind of institutions will universities then become? Cambridge University had a preview in the conclusions of the 1992 Academic

Audit: 'The protean nature of the [Cambridge] University's academic structures and system of governance is difficult to capture concisely in managerial language, or by reference to a straightforward organizational model' (quoted in the University's response, 1993). As the response drily noted, that does not prove that the system is unsatisfactory. No, but it shows us where the problem for quality auditors lies. The protean structures cannot be *described* in managerial language or *analysed* in terms of an organizational model. Whatever internal audit mechanisms are encouraged, they will be seeking for descriptions and analyses, that is, representations, of a particular kind. And what will be the subject of such representations? Management processes and organizational modelling.

I want to leave aside the question of management. There is a whole body of criticism emerging from scholars in management and accounting—I have cited only Hoskin, from a recent collection on *Accountability*, and Power, whose book *The Audit Society* will soon be published. This body of work addresses, among other things, the co-figuring of the auditee (how people's activities become auditable), the end of a long line of critique into governance and the way in which the state produces the individual person as a governable self. In observing that the auditee's own auditing methods are the principal subject of inspection, Power notes: 'What is audited is whether there is a system which embodies standards and the standards of performance themselves are shaped by the need to be auditable ... audit becomes a formal "loop" by which the system observes itself' (Ref. 5, pp. 36–37). Of course, all the new quality control body will have to do is make sure that its clones, the quality control bodies replicated within each institution, respond appropriately to the parent body. Now, that devolution of the audit (from experts to community, so to speak) will in turn devolve down the need to render practices observable. Who will do the observing? Or, the same point: who will do the describing and analysing, the modelling, the representing; who will be the new ethnographers?† The General Board at the University in 1992 knew that describing the formal structures of the university was not describing the university.

This brings me to organizational modelling, and to the assumption that what has to be modelled in order for an institution to be recognized as an institution performing adequately is the nature of its *organization*. Now, in one sense, this is unexceptional: any set of social practices will have an organizational dimension. But in another sense we see here a further conflation of 'is' and 'ought'. The university's workings must be described through a set of social elements already recognizable to the auditors—if they are not there then somehow the university is not there. The Report of the 1992 Academic Audit upbraids the University for not stating its 'aims and objectives'; for its 'informal and uncodified understanding about academic quality'; and for the fact that the course and examination

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†I draw here on comments made on an earlier version of this paper given to the Department of Anthropology in SOAS, London.

system 'does not readily lend itself to a tidy and straightforward procedure for programme design'.[6] In short: the auditors could not see how Cambridge University worked.

There may be many things wrong with the University, as with any institution, and no cause for complacency. But it is the prescriptive nature of the analysis that gives pause for thought. It seems to me, as an ethnographer, quite extraordinary that there was no enquiry into *how* the University worked. Or, rather, not extraordinary at all. The auditors' interest is not in producing an 'organizational model' in the sense of a model of an ongoing organization with its own characteristics, but in producing a model that would show how well Cambridge is organized to achieve its goals. And the evaluation of 'how well' is already taken care of by pre-existing measures. They measure the institution as an organization according to pre-set criteria of what an efficient organization *would* look like.

If, with the examining of students in mind, we asked how does one actually 'examine' an institution, we have the answer. The answer is: by the degree to which the institution conforms to certain standard models (representations) of organizations that achieve their goals. That is only the first part of the answer; the second is, by the extent to which the institution looks like other institutions that fall into this class, and thus can be described as so conforming. One would think therefore that, at the very least, the adequacy of the description might become an investigatable issue. Do we not teach students how to defend the basis on which their analyses are made? Does not research imply procedures by which we find out how things are? Where is the ordinary kind of academic self-scrutiny by which we approach other matters?

Part of that answer lies in the very nature of the audit exercise. It has pre-empted self-scrutiny. In other words, it already plays back to institutions the model of an organization in self-scrutinizing mould. That is why, for instance, we cannot simply ask the native speakers and listen to their account of the system. Audit got there first with the question. As part of the very process of examination, institutions have already been asked to describe themselves. And, as we have seen, their description of themselves as an organization has to conform to existing models. Yet this does not seem quite fair. Audit does, after all, recognize the distinctiveness of institutions when it asks what their own aims are. Here seems the opportunity for institutions to speak with their own voice. Not at all, however, because aims are conflated with objectives, that is, with how one *organizes* oneself to achieve them. This applies more directly to HEFCE's teaching than research exercise. How to assess the aims and objectives put forward by institutions have exercised TQA panels in terms of their realizability. 'Assessors are not asked to make an absolute judgement on the validity of subject aims and objectives themselves, but to draw on their own experience and expertise to make a relative judgement of their validity in relation to institutional aims and objectives, the student intake, and the needs and interests of stakeholders' (*HEFCE Assessors' Handbook*, October 1993). The 1996 RAE

instead asked for research plans, including 'verifiable targets', a perfectly reasonable request on its own but one which also (its very reasonableness assists) helps feed the audit culture. Elements taken alone may have a rationality that becomes something else when they are put into a wider context, as any student of gender relations knows of individual behaviour by men or women and its place within a larger field of power.

To an ethnographer, like any other enquirer into human affairs, analysis can only proceed on the basis of a theoretical model that makes evident what information is being selected for presentation. That process allows for conflict of interpretation and thus for competing models. There may well be disagreement as to the validity of the analysis; indeed such debate is a crucial component of the scholarly exercise. In the same way, one can imagine that an institution such as a university will not only have diverse aims but may have conflicting and competing ones. It may wish to do several things at once and in different arenas: not only to instruct persons but also to help them think independently; not only to provide the backup for well established research projects that have visible outcomes but also to tolerate hidden niches for the unexpected maverick or the genius who could be lodged anywhere in the system; to foster both productivity and creativity, knowing that these sometimes go together and sometimes do not. Diverse social arrangements allow one over time to move in many directions at once, or allow persons to go off in different directions. Contradiction is the engine of the intellect. But turn aims into objectives, turn multiple possibilities into plans for action, and contradiction is banished. The institution becomes judged by acts that presume unity—by the degree of consensus by which it will achieve its aims, and thus by the effectiveness with which it has actually *eliminated* contradictions. The simple model is that 'one' organization must be defined by one (coherent) mission. In other words, the institution is like a 'self', defined by an identifiable singleness of purpose. Here, the loop gets to throttling tautness: the 'self' in the invitation to self-scrutiny turns out to be already a particular kind of self—to be judged by criteria that agree what the self is, that is, the type of agency that propels persons/institutions towards their stated goals.

Improvement and reflexivity

Institutions are understood as behaving as agents who, like so many individual students, are involved in an examination process that is also a 'self'-examination. So where does this concept of the 'self' come from?

The self-governing self has been well described by the critics of human accounting.[3,7] On the one hand, it summons a type of rationality that has been integral to the development of 20th century governmentality, at once product and promoter of instruments of governance; on the other hand, self-scrutiny has become a *sine qua non* for certain kinds of scholarly pursuit. Applied to the practices of representation, it gives us reflexivity. Over the last 20 years, scholars of many persuasions have been developing reflexivity as a tool in description and

analysis. Reflexivity is the other face of accountability. This is what I meant when I said that contemporary trends in scholarship provide fertile ground for the audit culture. The content of the knowledge with which some parts of the academy have been equipping themselves is thus relevant to our theme. I refer to the effects of certain styles of argument in the humanities and social sciences. Note that this re-describes the shift that Gibbons et al.[8] record as between their two modes of knowledge production. They bracket 'social accountability' and 'reflexivity', and see reflexivity as a key characteristic of what they call Mode 2 (Ref. 8, pp. 102–104). 'Operating in Mode 2 makes all participants more reflexive' (Ref. 8, p. 7). By this they mean, among other things, that individuals cannot function effectively without describing their own standpoints in relation to those of others.

The global expansion of university disciplines over the last century was fuelled by, among other things, the systematic application of the axiom that knowledge was formed in finding out the reasons or pre-conditions for all kinds of social and natural facts. The scholar's skill was thus traditionally applied to rendering the implicit explicit. Articulated as 'reflexivity',[9] nowadays this very process of making-explicit is turned back on the producers of knowledge: they are asked to look within to find what they (or their discipline) have projected on to their objects of knowledge. Reflexivity, as it happens, comes easily to social anthropology: at once analytical stance, substantive knowledge and method, anthropological practice always was the expertise of being in two places at once—here and there, seeing 'ourselves' and 'others' at the same time. It depended on the perception of a divide that was constantly dissolving and reforming. Social anthropology is not alone—indeed its awareness of itself with that capability has been stimulated by other disciplines in the arts and humanities. Audit, we might say, is late company to sit down at the same table. We could call audit the supremely reflexive practice.

In this sense, audit does for institutions what protocols of self-scrutiny do for the scholar. The cultural potential is there for each to play back to and thus sustain the other, and I made mention of my own discipline in order to underline the fact that scholarship is part of the accountability process, not beyond it. What makes audit different from this brand of enquiry, however, is the linking of 'is' and 'ought'. In audit, *self-examination* is linked to *self-improvement*. I speak briefly of two British aspects of this, the perception of benefits and the perception of costs. Benefits and costs accrue to/fall on individuals and institutions alike.

Benefit: audit rewards the self-examining self. Listen to this sturdy statement of purpose from Glasner, an Associate Director of the Quality Assessment Division of the Higher Education Funding Council of England.

The purpose is to ensure accountability for public funds; to demonstrate that money is being well spent; to give the 'customer' an indication of the relative quality of provision; to provide a basis for linking funding to

enhancement of quality; and to enable the identification, sharing and publicising of best practice as a means of encouraging quality improvement (Ref. 10, p. 7).

Glasner goes on to stress that what is being assessed is the provider's own analysis of what it does, and whether the level of attainment of its objectives means it can meet its aims. She was specifically addressing the 1994–95 TQA review of anthropology provision. The assessment, she said, 'has had the potentially valuable effect of making transparent the effectiveness of anthropology's delivery to diverse institutional missions, aims and objectives' (Ref. 10, p. 9). That in turn will yield results. For even if the discipline does not know it, it has after all the ability to impart skills to its students. It follows, in this view, that the teaching of anthropology will be improved if it can attend to these skills.

Here, the axiom that education is about drawing capabilities out of people is being returned to education in a strong sense. HEFCE's spokeswoman makes it explicit: skills must be disembedded.

> A lack of clarity about the multitude of skills which are embedded in anthropology's teaching and learning restricts the ability of graduates to identify clearly their marketability (Ref. 10, p. 9).

Drawing skills out of students and good practice out of institutions finds common measure in the market place. Audit occupies the modest position of enabler—assisting persons and institutions to compete better.

However, by now the reader will not be surprised to learn that the skills have already been defined. The skills in question have to match up to certain expectations. Nor is it any surprise that—in certain respects—the expectations mimic the skills of audit presentation itself: clarity (rather than logic), itemization (rather than connection), bullet points (rather than paragraphs), and simplified organization (rather than involution or evolution in argument). Above all, no ambiguity, contradiction or hesitation. But more than that, it seems that 'skills' have a multi-site requisite built into them; aptitudes are not skills if they cannot be performed outside the initial context of learning. It is not just that they may be transferable, but that they *ought* to be. The idea of 'transferable skills' thus implies a process of secondary elicitation, namely that skills developed in one context can be used in others—they can become disembedded or free-floating. This does not mean disembedded from the person, since it is persons who move from one context to another and take the skills with them, but from the original learning environment. So skills acquire wider utility, provided they are to this extent extractable. (A good case of the implicit made explicit: a component of a process that was before taken for granted now becomes singled out for attention.) Transferability across learning environments suggests generic rather than specialized conditions for learning (learning environments become substitutable for one another) and thus it lays the ground for

de-disciplining of university subjects. (New Zealand is setting up a credits system whereby potential university students may acquire learning skills in a range of environments that will give exemption from substantive disciplinary training.)

However, the HEFCE spokeswoman was not just emphasizing the skills—equally important, it would seem, is awareness of them. What *really* has to be disembedded is reflexivity itself!

> [W]hilst the embedded nature of the development of a wide range of transferable and marketable skills is a great strength, inter alia in enhancing their effective development, it is also a weakness unless the fact that skills are being developed is articulated and understood by those who develop them, and is done so in a way which enables graduates to articulate them and employ them to good effect in their future careers ... (Ref. 10, pp. 8–9).

The self-examining self is rewarded by discovering its realizable assets.

Of course the institution has to assist in this self-examination. ('The process of assessment is a collaborative process of review, based on the provider's critical self-evaluation' Ref. 10, p. 7). When the founder of Girton College, Emily Davies, referred to the moral benefit that girls' secondary education would bring, she was thinking of the individual as a self capable of self-improvement. In the same way as measures such as examinations were regarded as instruments to make attainment visible, so institutions such as the college itself were instruments of the whole educative process. They were the means to the individual improvement of its members. If women had to be treated in the same way as men, the college would follow the constitution of a men's college, an institutional solution to the question of higher education for girls that took its place among burgeoning institutions of all kinds. Thus, the very possibility of higher education showed up the need for formal secondary school training, and the 1870s and 1880s saw the establishment of a network of secondary schools for girls. Institutions have their own runaway effect, both through the multiplication of organizations and through internal replication, each organization containing smaller organizations—committees, subcommittees—inside itself (it would not be an organization if it were not composed of such sub-elements). This means that institutions can be measured by institutions inside them: universities by the effectiveness of their separate cost-centres (disciplines/departments).

Some types of institutions are going to do a better job than others. So Emily Davies set her face against a separate university for women precisely because she had her ideas of what would work best *as* an institution. Latter day auditors also aim for the best environment of self-improvement. They may represent their practices as encouraging a move from the hidden to the open or else as putting in place management systems to do away with authoritarian structures imposed from above (outside) in favour of encourging internal motivation from below.[11] Thus, Power[5] criticizes the professionalization of agencies that leads to an over-managed audit at the expense of individual autonomy. This chimes with the

recommendations of the educationalist Cox[12] that adult learning should favour a move away from 'dependency' towards 'self-direction', so that the motivation to learn comes not from 'external pressures' but from 'internal, intrinsic' ones.

How is self-direction to be assisted? Well, again, the method is in part pre-defined. And here we move into the costs. However, they do not sound like costs to begin with—they sound like more enablements.

Back to the TQA spokeswoman. '[T]he overview report [on anthropology] highlights some areas for further attention of the institutions and of anthropologists. Whilst information technology (IT) provision is generally adequate to meet current needs, there is significant variation in the use made of IT and a lack of emphasis on IT skills development' (Ref. 10, p. 8). Information technology is presented as an inevitable adjunct of educational progress. And I mean inevitable: there is a (government) policy drive behind this across the education sector. On this issue, audit becomes exhortation. Institutional reviews deliberately promote the use of 'office-like' technology while also managing to suggest that knowledge itself is at stake; it is all contained in the phrase 'information technology'. Thus, using IT in teaching has been one of the *criteria* of successful delivery in the TQA's evaluation procedures. What is being reproduced here are not just the machines but the possibility of improvement by such means. If IT means enhanced lecture presentation and independent learning, who could possibly object? It is regarded as empowering of both teacher and pupil, and allows teacher–pupil 'contact' in new circumstances (e.g. long distance learning). At the same time the view is hegemonic, for IT carries all the cultural signs of innovativeness and cutting edge stuff. Useful improvements thus do duty as 'proof' of improvement.

Why do I say office-like? Audit has its own material apparatus. Audit in its expanded form of a bureaucratic monitor simply could not exist without the developments in office technology that have taken root over the last 20 years (alongside other less visibly 'applied' artefacts, notably the aesthetic practices of document production to which Annelise Riles[13] has drawn attention in another context), and I include here word processor, fax and photocopier, electronic mail. Between them these have introduced ubiquitous conventions of style and speed. New standards of presentation presume easily reproducible layout, the dissemination of paper, turnaround speed of response. Once again the instruments of improvement (which enable, for example, turnaround speed of response) mimic the auditing of the performance (speed of response proves the system is efficient). At the same time we can see how technology comes with the friendliest of epithets: it is enabling, because technology simultaneously assists the efficient running of the organization, and—if the government gets its way—educational practices themselves. A prosthesis, an extension for the individual, IT is all about facilitation, all above providing people with the skills to find out information. Mimicking education in turn, technology and audit sit side by side as instruments to assist in the supplying of information and the drawing out of skills.

The cost is crippling. It can be stated very briefly. One product of information technology is information, and it has brought us a new disease. Not just overload in general but information overload in particular. (The physical symptoms are apparently those of 'fatigue syndrome'.[14]) We know the cause: access is too easy; we know the symptom: anxiety about where to stop. The technology of information flow which leads to escalating demands on the assumption that anyone can produce information at any time without notice, goes hand in hand with those expectations about evidence for management which presume more and more professionalism in the way scholarly activity is formatted. Here is improvement gone mad.

The cost? Overload is more than a matter of competing demands on time. In higher education it becomes an assault on those activities which require reflection (maturation, time lapse for growth). Proof of performance and productivity requires outputs that can be measurable and thus made visible. This subverts the integral role that time with no visible output plays in both teaching and research. In teaching there must be a lapse of time—the process is not one of consumption but one of absorption and reformulation. In research, time must be set aside for all the wasteful and dead-end activities that precede the genuine findings*. Both require otherwise non-productive periods. Yet there is almost no language in the audit culture in which to talk about productive non-productivity. On the contrary, the very concept of overload suggests a management inadequacy on the part of the academic—one has not paced oneself properly. One should make time for time. The result is a vague, persistent and crippling sense of failure. That is compounded in the conflation of management with performance.[15]

Two brief pointers here. First, the requirement to monitor performance (outcome, the final show) becomes an interest in 'performativity' (the workings of the performance). An audit of an organization sets out to assess the effectiveness with which it works. Audit wants, as it were, to see organization 'at work', to be able to report on the organization working. Second, making institutions describe themselves is a key means by which audit systems reduce complexity. This is also a performative demand. Since the audit will make sense of an institution as an organization, it requires that it 'perform' being an organization through the very act of coherent self-description. Hence, the audit elicits a particular kind of account of the organization. It does not just want to hear how the institution is structured, but about its lines of communication and data flow, and thus how it functions as an organism, as though it were in constant activation, as though every component of the organization were in a state of perpetual self-awareness, animation and explicitness. Yet that state of ready representation is poor ethnography. Left to itself, an institution is likely to oscillate between activity and rest (if one imagines a daily regimen), between what is easily assimilatable and what less so (in the information that circulates)

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*This point was first made to me most strongly by Gillian Gillison (University of Toronto).

or explicitness and implicitness (of the values and rules by which it operates), as well as between the uses to which it can put both overt and tacit knowledge. Activation, in other words, is ordinarily intermittent.

The hyperactivity of an audit produces a description of the world as hyperactive. Well, hyperactivity was actually something of which Emily Davies's critics were apprehensive when they pondered on her plans for having girls sit public examinations. It was feared that they might get brain fever. As it turned out, the girls suffered from no such complaint, neither as candidates for the secondary school examinations nor later at university. However, brain fever is not a bad way of describing some of the excesses of auditing. It wasn't the girls who caught the complaint but the system!

Three comments

Auditing is not a foreign activity in higher education, but one that sits rather well with it. It is, after all, the organization of a set of procedures for examining institutions as organizations. Now, if it were just that, then the anthropologist might also regard it as a rather interesting social experiment—a kind of cultural replication, an approach to a laboratory-like test of social performance. The problem is the very value which we would no doubt like most to endorse, improvement. This has led to a compression of instruments and aims which finds its *raison d'être* (if we are to believe Hoskin) in the new regime of accountability and its concomitant, the audit of audit culture. Auditing is deliberately built on the conflation of measures with targets, and audit culture enhances the process. The British are familiar with this in university examinations. It is becoming increasingly difficult for credit to be gained for numerically average performance. Measurement and target rise together. And the corruption is endemic in one of the assumptions that follows in the wake of the Research Assessment Exercise—not yet a decade old—the idea that the goal is to encourage institutions to *improve their rating*.

How to abate the fever of enhancement? For all the important gains that audit has brought into public practice, what do we do with the overkill? What do we do with an abundance that threatens to asphyxiate us when the abundance is of oxygen? Can one have too much life-blood? Let me repeat that we are witnessing an effect that we (practitioners in higher education) have helped produce. Auditors are not aliens: they are a version of ourselves. The issues lie in commitment to the very values of academic excellence that eduational auditors and practitioners share.

As a practitioner in higher education, I end with three comments.

(1) A question. How to reduce information flow; how to foster the conditions for tacit and implicit knowledge to grow *unknown*; how to avoid the computer-aided bibliographic search becoming a paradigm for research as such?

(2) A problem. In making transferable skills an objective, one cannot repro-
    duce what makes a skill work, i.e. its embeddedness. Perhaps one should
    argue for an ecological response—that what is needed is the very ability to
    embed oneself in diverse contexts, but that can only be learnt one context
    at a time. Think of the anthropological fieldworker: if you embed yourself
    in site A you are more likely, not less, to be able to embed yourself in site
    B. But if in Site A you are always casting around for how you might do
    research in B or C or D, you never learn that. There is a lesson here for
    disciplines.
(3) An observation. Somehow we have to produce embedded knowledge: i.e.
    insights that are there for excavating later, when the context is right,
    but not until then. That is, we have not to block or hinder (as opposed
    to reproducing, imitating, studying or otherwise making an object of
    attention) the organism's capacity to use time for the absorption of
    information—perhaps we should be looking for time-released knowledge or
    delayed-reaction comprehension. (That is what working through substan-
    tive problems and theoretical puzzles are all about: the pacing and temporal
    effects of having to read a 350 page ethnography for example.) Not
    everything in the light on the table all the time.

Acknowledgements

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