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The use of accreditation systems in a European context

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Paper for the 2012-edition of the international (post)graduate course on Inclusion and Exclusion in Contemporary European Societies: 'Challenges of Europe, the Strength of Soft Power'.

April 16-20, 2012 | Dubrovnik (Croatia)

www.inclusionexclusion.eu

Preface

“It is really important who are in it, you always will have pragmatic ‘school fights’, one person thinks it has to be different, etc.”¹

The quote comes from a teacher within a faculty of Utrecht University, talking about accreditation committees.

This paper focuses on an accreditation of higher education in an European context. The central topic of the paper will be the tension within the nature of accreditation systems: they increase the quality of education, but at the same time accreditation systems do not work how they should work.

Accreditation means the process of certification of, in this case, higher education. In different countries it takes place in different ways. In the Netherlands and Flanders, for example, an accreditation organisation creates the framework with quality elements and organizes the evaluations. In the Netherlands, accreditation is a form of hard power: without a positive accreditation, a course may not start or continue.

In 1999, thirty countries signed the Bologna declaration. One of the goals of this declaration was to promote European cooperation in quality assurance and to “create a Europe of knowledge”.² This development can be seen in the growing awareness of the need to create a stronger and more far-reaching Europe.

Every second year, the ministers of higher education of the now 47 “Bologna countries” meet again, to discuss and specify the ‘Bologna process’.

In 2010, a final report was published, in which key aspects of the higher education systems of the 47 countries are set out, focussing on the impact of the Bologna process reforms. The European Accreditation is still a form of soft power: it is tempting for universities to participate, but not required.

In this paper, I will argue that it is good to invest in a European accreditation system, but under two conditions: the system must not replace the professional dialogue between

¹ “Het is echt van belang wie er in zit, je hebt altijd paradigmatische schoolstrijden, de een vindt dat het anders moet, etc.” (R8).

² Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, The European Higher Education Area, p. 1. Accessed through: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION1.pdf on 20 may 2012.

managers and teachers, and accreditation committees have to consist of people from different European countries.

This paper is based on my bachelor thesis, a case study within Utrecht University. Firstly, I will give a short theoretical overview of the relevant literature on the debates about middle managers and about quality systems, to make definitions clear and to create a framework through which the data can be interpreted. Because the case study has been done within a Dutch organisation, most of the literature will be based on Dutch research.

In this paper I will use the data of the case study. Therefore, secondly, I will explain shortly the methods I used to gain that data.

Then, I will discuss my empirical data to explain why quality systems do not work how they should work. Two reasons are relevant for the specific case of accreditation systems: the behaviour of middle managers and the subjectivity of assessments.

Finally, I will discuss the challenges of accreditation systems in a European dimension.

Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework the concepts of ‘public middle manager’ and ‘quality systems’ will be discussed. Four theoretical sub questions will be leading: ‘*what is a ‘public middle manager’*’, ‘*why do tensions exist in the role of a middle manager?*’, ‘*what is quality measurement*’ and ‘*how do middle managers react on performance measurement?*’ At first, the problem of public middle managers will be addressed.

What is a ‘public middle manager’?

A public manager is a manager who directs people within a public organization. He or she often manages professionals (Noordegraaf, Guijen & Meijer, 2011: 17). Often, a manager has a different name, like ‘team leader’ or ‘chief’, and they can be either directors or executives, but also project, process, or program managers (Noordegraaf, Guijen & Meijer, 2011: 18). However, the definition of a ‘middle manager’ is more difficult to find. A middle manager stands between professionals and at least one other management layer, in the organizational structure, mostly between the top management.

Gleeson and Shain (1999) state the following definition of middle managers in further education (FE): “*members of the FE workforce who assume managerial responsibility for the co-ordination of courses, people management, budgets and income generation, often having originally entered FE as classroom teachers*” (462).

In the case study that is used for this paper, the definition of Gleeson and Shain is followed. People within the university with coordination and financial management tasks are seen as middle managers.

In the definition, a tension can be discovered. Middle managers have to have managerial responsibility, and thus they have to deal with financial and managerial issues, while they were traditionally professionals themselves. They have been trained as teachers in this specific case and they know the interests of the teachers’ point of view. This can lead to tensions. This will be explained in the following paragraph.

Why do tensions exist in the role of a middle manager?

As explained shortly in the previous paragraph, tensions can exist between policy making focused on, for example, output, efficiency or processes, and the content based wishes of professionals.

This tension emerged when the theories of the free market entered the public sector during the eighties, as a result of the need for savings on governmental money. This way of thinking has led to a reorganisation of public institutions like universities, into institutions with financial solid policies. Economical models are nowadays used to control efficiency issues and to have insight in performances.

Middle managers are, as explained before, literally in the middle of an organizational structure. In this function, they have to translate policy that focuses on performance management and that is initiated by the top management, into workable agreements at the workplace. Their role is thus conflicting with itself. Gleeson and Shain explain this tension as follows:

“Not only do they mediate different tensions between, for example, funding and curriculum, but they also filter competing messages from ‘above and below’, in the translation of policy into practice, effectively ‘buffering’ potential conflict between senior managers and lecturers (Gleeson & Shain, 1999: 487).”

Middle managers have to filter and translate policy and information from both the layers above and below them. Recent research from de Wit (2011) also points out the difficult position of middle managers. In his dissertation he explains that middle managers often experience conflicts of loyalty to the managers above them on one side, and the professionals below them on the other side. Next to that, he points out that less research has focused on the perspective of the manager. According to de Wit, the perspective of the professional is mostly dominant in research. ‘The manager’ is often generalized concept and perceptions are interpreted outside their context (de Wit, 2011: 251).

Gastelaars (2011) concurs with this. She points out the difficulty of managing the different expectations and policies. Therefore, this paper focuses on the perspective of the manager.

Quality systems can contribute to these tensions of middle managers, who have to translate the policy into working tasks in the workplace. The next paragraph will explain how this works.

What is quality measurement?

This paper focuses on accreditation systems in higher education. Since accreditation is a specific form of quality measurement, a little general literature about quality systems will be discussed first. Finding a definition of quality will be the starting point. After a definition has been found, there will be a theoretical discussion about the behaviour of middle managers related to performance measurement.

The definition of quality is difficult and never unambiguous. Surely, what quality is depends on the judgement of the assessor (Hardjono, 2011: 262). This judgement has two elements: what is quality and who decides what quality is?

The first element depends on the subjective determination of what the framework of quality is going to be. What elements are going to be judged (van Kemmenade et al., 2008: 176)? In the specific case of accreditation: what elements of a course or university need to be evaluated? For example, are they going to look at the content of a course, or at the consistency of the curriculum?

The second question is who is going to be on the committee, which will assess by following the criteria of the framework. In other words, who is going to measure?

Both elements are thus depending on the perspective and judgement of people. Therefore, an assessment or accreditation always will be subjective. Interesting is that this conflicts with the original idea of performance measurement, which tries to create objective insight in what happens on the workplace.

Now that this has been made clear, it is important to give notion to the following. According to Noordegraaf (2011), registrations cannot be interpreted and understood outside the context within which they are created. Therefore, you cannot see them as 'absolute' (381).

Measurements will always be done within a specific context. For example, universities do collect all the marks students will get for a paper. The marks in themselves will indicate a score, but they will not say anything about the difficulty of test or of the course.

How do middle managers react on performance measurement?

Noordegraaf en Abma (2003) describe in their article 'Management by measurement' the development of quality systems in the public sphere. "*Public administration must perform, it was argued: it must find out what its 'customers' (citizens) want; it must determine, as precisely and measurable as possible, what it will 'produce'; it must produce; and it must evaluate whether production 'targets' have been met*" (855). Performance has to be measurable, so that it can be influenced by managers.

However, performance measurement does not always work how it should work. Theories have set out several explanations. One theory that is relevant for this paper is the behaviour of managers. In the following paragraph this theory will be set out further.

One of the main theories about this topic is the occurrence of the so called 'performance paradox'. Van Thiel & de Leeuw (2002) explain in their article that the development of performance measurement, focused on output, can lead to unintended, even negative effects (267). They call this the 'performance paradox' (van Thiel & de Leeuw, 2002: 271), which arises when the relation between the real and the reported performance decreases. It therefore explains something about the reports of performance, not about the performance itself. Because of these negative effects, the validity of the registrations will decrease (van Thiel & de Leeuw, 2002: 271). These effects have been examined in the case study.

According to the researchers Meyer en Gupta (1994, 330-342), there are four causes of the performance paradox. One of them is relevant for the research question of this paper, because it again says something about the behaviour of managers.

This cause of the performance paradox is the effect of 'perverse learning'; managers learn what aspects of quality of performance will be measured. They will use that information to influence the performance (van Thiel & de Leeuw, 2002: 271).

De Bruijn (2007) also writes something similar about the results of performance measurements and the performance paradox. He sets out that performance measurement leads to strategic behaviour (de Bruijn, 2007: 17). Elements of quality that are important from a professional point of view, are, according to de Bruijn, neglected because of the focus on managerial choices.

Now that the theoretical framework has been made clear, it is possible to analyse and interpret the empirical data. The next chapter will focus on the methodological approach of the case study.

The case study

My bachelor thesis was a case study about the effect of quality systems on the behaviour of middle managers and professionals. The case study has been done within the organization 'Utrecht University'. In this chapter, I will explain shortly how I have conducted the study.

The study was an interpretative, qualitative research. This was a logical choice, since the purpose of the research question was to find out more about experiences of middle managers and professionals and not about, among others, gaining statistical data.

The role of theory of course depends on the nature of the research. In empirical research it is common to see theory as the framework through which data can be interpreted and explained (van Thiel, 2007, 44). "In our view, theory is a way of seeing and thinking about the world rather than an abstract representation of it" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000: 37). In this paper, these argumentations of van Thiel and Alvesson and Deetz are followed. Theory will thus lead to a set of expectations and a framework to analyze the empirical data.

The research was a single case study and it was done within three faculties of Utrecht University: the faculty of Social Science, the Faculty of Beta Sciences and the faculty of Humanities ('Geesteswetenschappen'). These faculties are chosen because they are all of a large size and they represent as much as possible the different kinds of disciplines within the university.

Two methods were used to gain the empirical data: interviews and a small document analysis. By doing interviews, the middle managers and teachers could talk about their points of view and their experience with quality systems. The respondents were selected by purposive sampling to guarantee the most representativeness of different jobs and types of functions. Besides, I used semi-structured interviews, with topics that were derived from the theoretical framework. The second method was a document analysis. This was important, because it contributed to the confirmation of the data gained through the interviews.

Now that the methodological approach has been clarified, the following chapter will continue with the data analysis.

Data analysis

In this chapter, the data of the case study will be discussed. The case study focused on the effect of quality systems in general on the behaviour of middle managers and teachers.

Focussing on the main topic of this paper, accreditation systems in a European context, it is relevant to set out the findings regarding the behaviour of middle managers. These outcomes will explain why quality systems, more specifically accreditation systems, do not work out as intended. Two main outcomes of the study will be discussed below.

At first, quality systems do influence the way middle managers work. Because of efficiency and quality requirements middle managers are forced to create a system of quality measurement. Within this system, they try to perform in a strategic way. Three different ways of strategic behaviour were found to take place in the case study. The common denominator is that they try to influence the performance in an active way. Below, the three forms of strategic behaviour will be set out.

Firstly, managers were creative with ‘naming’ certain activities. This can be explained with the following quote:

“Well, if students don’t see the consistency of the curriculum of our course, we make sure that at least we say something about the consistency in the first year.”³

In this example, the word ‘consistency’ is named consciously, to attain that students will recognize it when they have to fill in a survey. In this way, the course is hoping to reach a higher figure on the element ‘consistency of the curriculum’.

Secondly, managers are creative with words or figures. In the following example, a middle manager explains how he tries to expand the definition of the word ‘contact hour’, in order to be able to comply with the standard.

“Well, you try to stretch the amount of contact hours up to scheduled hours. Hours in which you can walk into the room of the teacher to ask him questions, are also contact hours now.”

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³ *Nou als studenten geen samenhang zien in de opleiding, dan verander je het eerste jaar zodat je in elk geval iets zégt over de samenhang.” (R5).*

⁴ *“Nou je probeert het aantal contacturen op te rekken naar ingeroosterde uren.”. Een andere respondent beaamt dat ‘uren dat je in kan lopen om vragen te stellen ook contacturen zijn’ (R4).*

So, middle managers are trying to be creative with language to reach the standards, instead of really improving the quality of education, or more specifically in this example, the amount of lectures per week.

The third form of strategic behaviour middle managers tend to show is that they follow the framework of the accreditation. They learn what is expected and react by applying their policies. This can be explained by the theory of van Thiel and the Leeuw (2002) that has been discussed earlier in this paper, about perverse learning. Concretely, middle managers organize 'visitation trials', an internal accreditation in which the course holds mock visitations, as it were. The goal of this trial is that people within the organization know what the real committee thinks is important. Teachers learn what they need to say when the real committee will interview them and elements that are not good enough will be improved. In this way, it is not their own vision, but the subjective determination of the external committee that decides on the policy on quality.

Middle managers thus perform strategic behaviour to influence performance, with the result that the determination of quality elements is not always a good reproduction of reality.

In addition to the first conclusion, the second main conclusion focuses on the interpretation of figures. The case study demonstrated that there turned out to be a gap between how accreditation committees interpret the figures, and what really happens in the workplace. This has, according to the case study, one main cause, namely the subjectivity of members of accreditation committees. As explained in the theoretical framework of this paper, an evaluation always depends on the framework of the accreditation and the members of the committee. Judging has to be done by people, who have their own human preferences and points of view.

At the same time, in the case of Dutch universities, another problem with subjectivity occurs within the system of accreditation, namely the problem of personal interests. This can be explained best by the following quote from one of the respondents:

“The problem is that otherwise you will get people [in the committee] who are too closely concerned to the field and who are therefore not without any interests.(...) It is really

important who are in it; you will always have pragmatic 'school fights', one person thinks it has to be different, etc."⁵

Consequently, an assessment done by people who are active in the same field, is susceptible to pragmatic disagreements and therefore to an prejudiced judgement.

Two main conclusions turned out to be relevant for the problem discussed in this paper. Quality systems are created to make performance measurable and controllable. At the same time, they can cause strategic behaviour with middle managers. This behaviour, in turn, can deform the results of a measurement. Then, subjectivity and personal interests of accreditation committees question the plausibility of accreditations.

This conclusion can be drawn based on this specific case. However, due to the confirmation of the expectations of the theoretical framework, it could be possible that this conclusion will be the same for other universities. Therefore it will be interesting to discuss these conclusions in a broader perspective: the European context. This will be done in the next chapter.

⁵ *"Het probleem is dat je anders al gauw mensen krijgt die te dicht op het werkveld zitten en daardoor niet belangeloos zijn. (...) Het is echt van belang wie er in zit, je hebt altijd paradigmatische schoolstrijden, de een vindt dat het anders moet, etc."* (R8).

Accreditation systems in a European context

Due to two conclusions of the data analyses, it can be concluded that it is undesirable to base quality policies only on the results of quality measurement. Surely, they will never give full insight in what really happens in practice. In the context of the sub theme of this course, ‘the strength of soft power’, I can conclude that hard power only, namely the hard assessments of quality and accreditation systems, is not enough to reach the highest level of quality.

At the same time, accreditations are useful to create standards for education. In the growing cooperation of European countries and the tendency to stimulate exchange of students, it is important that courses can be compared and that there is a system of control. Moreover, by setting up standards and organizing a system of control, the entire level of the European education can be brought up to a higher standard. In the central theme of the course, ‘social inclusion and exclusion’, this would mean that countries with a lower level of quality could be included in a growing trend. This would be advantageous for these countries, but also for Europe as a whole, since it will contribute to closer contacts between European countries, which in turn will further stimulate European cooperation.

In this argumentation a tension is notable. Accreditations are good for the European education and collaboration, but at the same time accreditation systems do not work how they should work.

As explained in the preface, European accreditation is still a form of soft power. Universities are not obliged to have any European accreditations. Therefore, it is possible to use the strength of soft power and to entice countries to use the European accreditations in specific way.

My assumption is that it is good to invest in a European accreditation system, but under two conditions: the system may not replace the professional dialogue between managers and teachers, and accreditation committees have to consist of people from different European countries. I will elaborate on this in the following paragraph.

The Dutch and Western European society is now dominated by digital media and information systems. In this context, it is easy to think that these systems can replace face-to-face-

contacts. In my research I showed that this is at least not the case for universities. Therefore I strongly recommend to both top and middle managers of universities to get or stay in touch with the teachers and build on a strong relationship. When managers start a dialogue with teachers, they will be able to put the output of measurements into perspective and they will know the context in which the figures have arisen. When managers are conscious about the stories and the culture in the workplace, they will be able to interpret the figures properly. When they understand the perspective of the professionals, it will be easier to make quality policies fit. In this way, mutual expectations can be discussed in a professional way.

Furthermore, when relationships between managers and professionals are stronger, it will be easier for managers to get their teachers to work or think in a specific way. In other words, when managers use soft power and cooperate with the teachers, outcomes of quality measurement can be better understood and policy can be implemented successfully. Quality systems and interaction between managers and professionals can be complemented, so the combination of both hard and soft power will increase the total quality of education.

The second condition is relevant in with regard to the literature on the subjectivity of quality, based on van Kemmenade et al. (2008). These researchers point out, as explained earlier in this paper, that quality depends on the framework through which it is judged, and on who will be the assessors (van Kemmenade et al., 2008, 176). This debate turned out to be relevant within universities, specifically focused on accreditations. Accreditation committees visit a university or a course and evaluate the quality of either. But, as I explained before, it is impossible to judge in an objective way.

However, subjectivity is something you cannot 'abolish' or 'banish'. Every person interprets things, regardless of someone's knowledge or skills. A content or perspective based disagreement cannot be prevented.

Difficult, especially in the Dutch case, is also the competitive character of higher education: universities have to compete with one another. Therefore, it is rather strange that Dutch researchers and teachers are in the Dutch accreditation committees. Since a few years, there have been experiments with international collaboration in these committees. In my view, it would be good to continue and to expand this to European accreditation committees.

Collaboration between European countries will decrease the change in interests in two ways. Firstly, it will decrease the change of interests, because competitiveness will be less present

directly within the European context. Secondly, there will be a smaller risk of researchers and teachers knowing each other personally, which will increase the change in personal interests.

In conclusion, it would be interesting to invest in relations within European universities. A European system of quality measurement, in the form of a European accreditation system, could contribute to the inclusion of relatively poor countries and it will increase the entire level of higher education in Europe. I made clear that this system can be effective under two conditions: the accreditation committees must consist of people from different countries and the system cannot replace the contacts between middle managers and professionals in the actual workplace. Finally, further research could focus on searching for a way to organize and implement this idea of European accreditation.

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