

Grecian Urns and Yellow Cards - Quality and the internalisation of the quasi-market in the FE sector

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Abstract

FE is a terrain that has been dominated by charismatic and transformational models of leadership ever since the incorporation and independence of FE colleges was brought about by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). The notion of reculturing staff, the deprofessionalisation of teachers, the McDonaldisation of education, the application of industrial models (TQM) as well as extensive unionised resistance to the changes have been a feature of the sector since that time. This meditation is presented in the form of a monologue which is necessarily descriptive (and even literary) in flavour and is based on observation and experience. This monologue is used as a vehicle to explore and highlight pertinent issues and is driven by concerns around the inappropriate nature of the models of leadership and management that are evolving within the policy and funding frameworks that have taken root. The mythical Kwikqual College is presented as epitomising some of the worst aspects of the sector. Its context is typical, being one in which there has to be year on year change in response to the demands of the FE quasi-market. This paper focuses on one possible internal quality mechanism that colleges might implement in order to inform decision-making about the direction of their provision.

“Welcome everyone on this bright sunny morning[1]. This morning we are going to be asking ourselves some searching questions about the direction of Kwikqual College[2]. We're going to be looking at the quality of some of our provision and at its cost. Because we need to be asking ourselves: Can we afford to keep running programmes that are sub-standard? We need to ask ourselves those questions because

sooner or later the LSC[3] will be asking the same questions and we may have solutions imposed rather than being able to control and restructure our provision in the way we choose[4].

“There is more than £1 million's worth of manager in this room. And at that cost, it is reasonable for me to expect (and for The Taxpayer to expect) consistency in the quality of the educational experiences we are offering[5]. However, consistency is not something we are in a position to boast about. The problem this College has is variability. There is a great variability in the quality of our provision[6]. Although there are some departments which have excellent success rates[7] and staff efficiency rates, there are other departments that year on year have much poorer rates. Now, £1 million is a lot of Taxpayer's money and in the circumstances it could be described as unethical to expect the successful departments in this College to prop up the average and below average.

“One of my duties as Principal and Chief Executive[8] is to ensure transparency in the way that public money is spent. Following the consultation that took place on this in March, in which I asked you to devise a range of weighting criteria against which to judge the performance of each department, today you are being issued with the first version of KEATS (Kwikqual Efficiency Annual Team Statistics) which presents the figures for each division and department in terms of a range of factors including enrolment rates, success rates, staff efficiency, staff absence, staff qualifications and take-up of staff development[9]. Now, I remember that some of you objected to the publication of a League Table[10] and I'm still baffled as to why, as managers, you were reluctant to see the development of KEATS - particularly as this is information that will help you to manage[11]. Anyway, we have gone ahead - too much time and planning had already been invested in the project.

“If you look at the front cover of the document you will see a picture of the poet John Keats and next to it a quotation from one his most famous poems *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The quotation reads as follows:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.[12]*

“The quotation is appropriate because inside this document we have a compilation and collation of a whole range of statistics designed to reveal the true picture of College provision as it stands[13]. I will just take you through one page to illustrate how the data works[14].

“On the first page you will see that the twenty six departments of Kwikqual College have been listed down the left hand column and then across the table there are a number of percentages and other figures. This particular page (page 4) is giving a statistical breakdown of staff efficiency. It provides details of the extent to which the staff in each section this year have met their annual target teaching hours[15]. As you can see, the department on the top line has been ranked first because its staff efficiency is 96%. That department deserves congratulations: that is a fantastic efficiency rate. On the other hand, scanning down, we can see other departments have lower rates, some as low as 46%.

“One of the key indicators that the LSC will be interested in is the success rate of each course. We do know that the LSC will be asking searching questions about the funding of any course that comes out with less than a 60% success rate. 60%! I would like all of you to use that figure as a benchmark[16]. And looking at the statistics on these pages, that means we have got some serious issues to address.

“Now, on the very last page, all of these statistics have been consolidated in order to provide an overall League Table. This gives us the clearest picture of which departments are failing and which forthwith will be put under Special Measures [17]. The idea is to use these figures alongside the ongoing mechanism of our MOT [18] quality system in an attempt to streamline and create a greater awareness and sense of responsibility amongst you all for the performance of your department.

“I am giving you the opportunity to review these figures and to comment on them. Then in June, this year's finalised League Table of College Departments will be issued so that we can all see quite plainly which are the successful areas of Kwikqual College and which are not. Now, if we have got any dead wood or any products that are past their sell-by date[19] - and I'm not making a judgement either way, I leave that to you - then at least we are in a position to do something positive about it. My suggestion is that, in the coming academic year, any department under Special

Measures will be given a Yellow Card[20], and a period of time in which to bring about improvements. If this period of time elapses without improvement becoming apparent, then the College Strategic Plan will have to look carefully into whether we can continue to fund such poor provision.

“Before I ask for any comments, I would just like to respond to those of you who raised objections to the whole idea of creating KEATS and the League Table. Some of you suggested that the comparisons generated by this data tool (and that's all it is) would not be fair. There were complaints that we would be comparing apples with oranges and that the comparison would be invalid. My response today to those comments is that it is going to be down to you as departmental managers to argue your case at the MOTs, to present and contextualise the data[21]. The comparisons are not invalid, indeed they are absolutely necessary if we are to be able to continue to compete in a city which is full of other providers.

“Any comments?”[22]

Notes

[1] This article is an attempt to look at the impact of quasi-marketisation at the level of the institution and within that, at the level of the manager / member of staff. In that sense, it presents a picture of a human situation that has been brought into being by administrative procedures and political decisions. The monologue form has the benefit of providing a dramatic and 'real' sense of the way in which some FE colleges are being managed but I am also conscious of its limitations. For example, there is a danger that arises from the satirical feel of the piece - namely that it presents a stereotyped and hyperbolic picture that can be easily dismissed by the reader. On the other hand, the political use of satire has an honourable tradition that extends back at least as far as the plays of Aristophanes (Aristophanes 2003) though readers may be more familiar with the more contemporary example of *The Simpsons*.

To those outside the sector, the monologue may seem fanciful, but it is my firm belief that it will be instantly recognised by many people currently in or recently escaped from FE. Apart from that, this article is based on real events.

[2] The name is suggestive of a quasi-marketised context in which managerialist approaches have become established and educational courses are conceived as "off the shelf products" with an emphasis on outcome rather than process. In this environment, the student is positioned as "customer" or "consumer". Within the commodified view of education - Shain and Gleeson (1999, p56) describe it as the "economising of education" - productivity is a salient concern. The cost of any given course is determined by how many hours teaching it requires and the relative cost of the teacher (less experienced and temporary staff are cheaper to employ). Clearly, the quicker students are able to achieve, the less expensive course. An example of this is that following incorporation, as full time A level students were funded only for 450 hours of teaching time, full time courses' teaching time was cut to match this. Typically, this involved a reduction of an hour and a half a week for each subject.

[3] The Learning and Skills Council - local arms of this national body took over from the Further Education Funding Council in 2001. The Local LSCs have planning and funding remits. An important way in which the quasi-marketisation of the FE sector has worked is that the constraints and steers of external bodies (e.g. governmental through the LSC) have been used within colleges to justify management systems, restructurings and curriculum development. To that extent, the (local) LSC is a key player in the FE quasi-market and has the ability to influence and shape the curricula offered by the colleges it funds.

Currently, the parabola of FE curricula seems to have moved through 360°. Prior to incorporation, Technology Colleges were institutions that had, in many cases, moved towards a broad curriculum embracing both academic and vocational routes by the time of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Initially, if anything, the original funding methodology encouraged a further broadening as colleges desperately searched for new courses to bring in their unit targets and guarantee their funding. Community provision in which colleges rushed to accredit existing learning that was taking place off-site in various community settings was a good example of this. The inception of the Learning and Skills Councils seems to involve a recognition that the curricular free-for-all of a quasi-market with no regional steerage mainly served the business interests of individual colleges (Kennedy 1997). The new emphasis championed by local LSCs is on specialisation, a narrowing of curricula

with a focus on "excellence" of provision (see for example, LSC 2002). The forces of the quasi-market seem also to have resulted in academic courses like A level and GCSE being confined to VIth Form Colleges while FE colleges have once again picked up the (vocational and) technological mantle.

[4] Since incorporation, restructuring has become a defining feature of the FE terrain. Restructuring may involve the merging of existing departments, the establishment of new departments and/or the abolition of "unproductive" departments. Restructuring is a key technology in the "commodification" (Gewirtz 2000) of the sector. FE funding bodies (the LSCs and before them the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs)) have historically distributed funds in order to facilitate the reorganisation of colleges so that they better serve the needs of local industry (see for example Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland(2001)). While this may facilitate a flexible realignment of educational provision to the needs of local economies, it is also a strategic instrument for Principals to shape staffing profiles, to promote those with "preferred" values (Avis 2002, p346) and to implement "cultural change" (Jephcote 1996).

[5] Whether or not the principal of Kwikqual College is including himself in the overall figure merits enquiry. According NATFHE (2003) in 2003, the average pay of a college principal in Birmingham in the West Midlands stood at just under £100,000. Incorporation removed from colleges' governing bodies the local democratically accountable presence of representatives from Local Education Authorities. This then freed up FE college principals to reorganise salary structures and pension arrangements for senior managers provided they were able to justify this to the remuneration committee of the college corporation (which in some cases they chaired). Worryingly, at the same time, the quasi-marketisation of the sector seems to have resulted in the ascendance of a small cadre of principals who have presided over the financial demise of their colleges often resulting in the compulsory redundancies of large numbers of teachers (Crequer 1996 and 2004, Gleeson and Shain, 1999).

[6] Quality is a vexed issue in the FE terrain. The managerialisation of the sector that followed incorporation in 1993 was a response to funding imperatives that demanded 24% growth for a 16% increase in funding in the first three years. The funding methodology set up by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) introduced a new

kind of accountability through input/output data which still grips the sector today. Typically, retention and achievement rates became the focus of attention. The requirement to build data gathering systems and organisational and administrative arrangements to implement these drove through important structural and management changes within colleges. Teachers, however, had negative views about the extent to which 'quality' was commandeered as a term by managers and debased to mean paperwork (see, for example, Smith 2004).

Quality systems across the sector vary but some colleges have adopted Total Quality Management (TQM) approaches imported from US business practices (see Smith 2004, p213) that combine features of "empowerment" of staff and a reculturing project that ensures that all employees share appropriate (corporate) values. These approaches are underpinned by a principle that continuous, year on year improvement against targets is desirable. This principle cuts across grass roots teacher perceptions about the uniqueness of annual student cohorts. Furthermore, some versions of TQM are underpinned by an international ideology of the commodification of education. For example, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) states its mission as being:

To stimulate and assist organisations throughout Europe to participate in improvement activities leading ultimately to excellence in customer and employee satisfaction, influence society and business results; and to support the managers of European organisations in accelerating the process of making Total Quality Management a decisive factor for achieving global competitive advantage for Western Europe (Balrige 2002).

The notion that courses should expect to achieve uniform rates of achievement across subject areas in the FE context ignores the huge variation in the students provided for. The variation might extend from a student with Learning Difficulties who is bussed in to College and home again (with a likely retention and attendance rate of 100%) and a working parent with children undertaking a qualification part time in the evenings and therefore subject to a range of other pressures that might militate against the achievement of similar rates.

[7] This indicator was introduced by the LSC and is reached by multiplying the retention rate of a course or qualification by the achievement figure. The usefulness of the figure merits inquiry on two counts: i) If funding depends on achievement and

completion, the cultural knock-on effect might be that students are likely to be recruited who are thought to represent a low risk of dropping out or failing; ii) this indicator prescribes a set throughput time for every qualification and every student. Such a technology of standardisation makes no allowances for the different rates at which students learn.

[8] Ranson and Stewart (1994) chart the development, in Post War Britain of a "social democratic polity" that emphasised a "passive public, taking its lead from professional experts and distant elected representatives" (Ranson and Stewart 1994, p258). From there, they argue that a "neo-liberal polity" has evolved that positions the public as customers operating within markets. For them, public engagement with democratic processes has atrophied. They argue that notions of "the public domain" need to be emphasised by managers within public organisation; that both staff and the public need to be regarded as citizens (and accorded democratic rights) within that domain. Their notion of "the public good" cuts across the institutionally focused interests that are stimulated by quasi-marketisation.

A very different model of management is being promoted here and one that conforms to what they designate a "neo-liberal polity". In this model, democratic accountability is reduced to a discourse that disciplines public sector staff to achieve institutionally calibrated efficiency targets. Interestingly, the democratic accountability to the communities served by the College and their needs/ wishes as students to access particular courses locally are overridden by institutional requirements. Rather than re-energising the concepts of "the public domain" and of students and staff as citizens (Ranson and Stewart's suggested way forward), the model of management displayed here is informed by a competitive, marketised and individualistic culture that encourages the activities of performativity (that for Ball (1999) transforms Inspection into "an enacted fantasy") *within* the institution. The "inauthenticity" Ball warns about, in which performativity is destructive of "authentic and purposeful relations" (Ball 2002, p10) is a predictable outcome in an environment in which punitive models of accountability are institutionalised.

[9] Within the FE terrain, staff development may mean a range of things. For staff who are employed without teaching qualifications, staff development is driven by their contractual obligation to pursue a teaching qualification and achieve it by a given

date. Staff development more typically involves end of year, college events in which the "reculturing" (Jephcote 1996) of staff to ensure a better fit between corporate and individual goals can be engineered. Hence, take up of Staff Development may be interpreted as an indicator of the extent to which staff are "embracing" (Yarrow and Esland 1998) the required cultural change or a measure of their "dissent".

[10] The analogy of FE College principalship to football management is one that has currency according to Peter Pendle, general secretary of the Association of College Management (quoted in Hook (2005): "Being a principal is like being a football manager. A couple of bad results and you are out." The analogy links to the notion that leadership within the sector is dominated by "masculinist" (Kerfoot 2001), transformative and charismatic models (Gunter 2001). Lumby disputes this. Her study sampled views of principals and "the idea of a charismatic leader was largely rejected" (Lumby 2000, p143). However, the politics of voice may have relevance here: part of the aura of charisma and part of its power may reside in the sense of it as a 'natural', unconscious and given quality. If that is so, the moment its contrivedness becomes apparent, it ceases to be (charismatic). Hence, the most consciously charismatic principal might be the least likely to acknowledge it.

The football manager analogy is further supported in the imperative to avoid any "bad results". Here, however, the similarity ends as FE college principals are not concerned with results *per se* but with the *representation* of results. The importance of represented results within the FE quasi-market creates a powerful impetus to develop management and information systems that serve the institutional interest of the College at the expense of transparency. Ball (1999, p10) provides a critique on the accuracy of the information that schools and colleges generate for the quasi-markets they find themselves in: "technologies and calculations which appear to make public sector organisations more transparent may actually result in making them more opaque as representational artefacts are increasingly constructed with great deliberation and sophistication".

[11] The managerialist mindset that equates management with the manipulation of figures related to input and output rather than engagement with human beings promulgates a technical rationality. This is localised in the sense that it is governed by the prioritisation of institutional needs above all else. For Habermas (1996b, p276)

technical rationality is increasingly governing social progress and this results in a "loss of meaning and freedom" that is "structurally generated". Habermas contrasts this exclusionary rationality with "communicative rationality" which is achieved through the interaction of public discussion and through "communicative action" which assumes the "possibility of an objective agreement between competing interests" (Habermas 1996a). Communicative rationality is directed to the achievement of human progress, hence it collides with a debased and parochial, quasi-market orientated rationality.

[12] *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Lines 49-50, in Barnard, J. (ed) (1973) *John Keats, The Complete Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp 344-346. The principal's reference to this iconic Romantic poem suggests irony or extreme complacency. Ironic or not, KEATS as a quality initiative demonstrates a number of things. First, there is a sense that the document has taken on an aura, an existence independent from the human processes and events it purports to signify. In the Kwikqual context, the KEATS document carries the "aura" of instrumentalised Truth; focused within it is the potential to close provision, kick-start new provision, develop new employment possibilities and close out others. These fetishised data, uncoupled from their referents, celebrate the illusory triumph over nature characteristic of a technicised and managerialist management approach.

Secondly, the strategy of masking activities and data that warrant and are susceptible to political analysis behind an aesthetic appeal to the senses is familiar from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin (1970) writes about the transformation of the political into the aesthetic moment, the political process into the aesthetic spectacle. For him, this was epitomised by fascism in general and Nazism in particular. The aestheticisation of politics is a strategy which seeks to occlude critique. Instead, the participant is invited to "think with one's blood" to interact exclusively at an emotional level.

[13] The use of statistics as a positivist justification for the implementation of policy has reached such epidemic proportions in advanced Western societies, it can justifiably be regarded as an epistemological crisis. In educational circles, the bureaucratic and institutional bases for concocting favourable figures are well known (though understandably much less well documented). Ball (2002, p10-11) uses the Lyotardian notions of performativity and fabrication to describe these phenomena. He

sees a new "ethics" emerging which privileges "institutional self-interest" over the more traditional "authenticity and commitment" of educationalists. In the context of a quasi-market, 'truth' is a representational gambit, a performative conglomeration of signifiers that serves the interests of a given institution.

[14] In the case of KEATS, the intention is that the data can be made to 'work' as an internal technology of discipline. The performance of departments is put on display in a ritual of congratulation and humiliation. The harnessing of employee affects in the service of corporation aims might be one tactic here: the stimulation of 'ownership' of the departmental scores, feelings of guilt at poor scores, or envy at the better scores of other departments. Here the Habermasian notion of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' (Habermas 1996b) is helpful in describing how technical and administrative systems are being allowed to dominate human processes connected with culture and mutual understanding.

While educational processes are reduced to outcomes, a new and manipulative relationship between technical knowledge and teachers/managers is cultivated. The quality cycle comprises a series of events in which a centralised team of senior managers requires gratification through the presentation of 'pleasing' data on the part of middle managers. Those departments that are unable to deliver favourable figures are pilloried and fall out of favour; those departments with better statistics (or the skills to manipulate the statistics in order to make them appear favourable) are "preferred". Such a quality system alters and politicises notions of quality as the job of the "good teacher" is no longer safe if her/his courses are under the auspices of a "failing" department. For aspiring managers within managerialist organisations in which transferable skills are valued and manager links to subject specialisms viewed with scepticism, the prize department is one that has few weak areas. This mechanism of accountability has strong resonances with medieval feudal hierarchies.

[15] The annual hours target became a feature of college approaches to staffing following incorporation. Prior to 1993, the conditions of the existing contract (the so-called Silver Book) did prescribe 756 hours as an annual figure but this was a maximum rather than a target. Incorporation was followed by a concerted attempt by the College Employers' Forum (CEF) to facilitate the national imposition of a new 'flexible' contract. This attempt failed and most college management negotiated with

teachers' unions locally, resulting nationally in a patchwork of different conditions. Annual teaching hour targets in most FE colleges are currently in the region of 800-840 hours per annum. The CEF's preferred approach was one that abolished the distinction between 'contact' and 'non-contact' time, thereby doing away with prescriptive limits altogether.

[16] The language of managerialism is full of metaphors connected with measuring. The term 'benchmark' is an example of a word that links closely to policy science and accountability. The word originates in the symbol carved into a wall or other fixed object as a reference point from which a surveyor could measure altitude. Benchmarking becomes an activity in which complex human processes are conceptualised as measurable in an unproblematic way. The benchmark metaphor is a tool in the ideologically constructed technology of quality that facilitates and engineers the comparison of localised and context-bound educational experiences to exterior national (and global) standards.

[17] 'Under Special Measures' is a label that is attached to schools that have failed OFSTED inspections. The potential negative impact of the label itself has become an issue that has attracted debate (e.g. Nicolaidou and Ainscow, 2002).

[18] Meeting Ongoing Targets (!). The automotive metaphor invites citation of Hodkinson (1996 p124) who comments on technical rationality as an attitude in which: "in essence, life is seen as engineering and people as machines".

[19] Both metaphors surfaced frequently in Smith's research into the effects of the quasi-marketisation of FE (Smith 2004).

[20] See note 6.

[21] The performativity Ball (2002) refers to is here given an extra twist. The data that has been generated does not speak for itself but rather is a tool to be used in a specific performative context. In this situation where data has been generated to meet management purposes, an extra political dimension is opened up in which managers are invited to perform an act of interpretation of (potentially recalcitrant) data. This performance takes place within a contested political site (in which there are favoured

individuals or curriculum areas) and can be judged by the senior management team. Arguably, the establishment of such "quality fora" represents part of a college reculturing project as it favours a particular style of manager or managers with particular (competitive and individualistic) strengths and values. This is affirmed by Du Gay's comments that within "an increasingly competitive and chaotic global free market 'that can't be bucked'" the New Right expects corporations to divest themselves of a "dependency mentality" and instead cultivate "entrepreneurial spirit" (Du Gay 1996, p65). That this reculturing project includes a prescriptive gender element is explored by Kerfoot (2001) and Reay and Ball (2000) who comment on how the quasi-marketised educational terrain appears to favour masculinist behaviour.

In an effort to resuscitate models of agency in the public domain, Ranson (1998, p258) asserts the importance of institutions. In this context, the nature of leadership becomes crucial as the culture of an institution is shaped by its senior managers and that, in turn, shapes the identity of its employees:

(Institutions) mediate the relationship people have to their society through social time and space. At the same time, what institutions become, the values and interests they embody, are shaped by the agency and power of those that come to control them.

The introduction of a competitive performance table of departments within an institution can be regarded as a technology designed to nurture and reward localised performance. The inference here is that the FE quasi-market has preferred a kind of leadership that favours this kind of technicised management system coupled with a Darwinian, self-interested culture.

[22] At the meeting on which this article is based, it has been alleged that at this point one of the departmental managers put up her hand. She apologised for the performance of her department and acknowledged that it was "the laughing stock of the college" because of a poor pass rate. She expressed her feelings of responsibility for that. The manager then left the room visibly upset. On her return, one or two of the other managers offered support and insisted that this was not the attitude of most of the people present. The principal said nothing.

Allegedly, the department referred to had been set up to manage staff development, in particular on in-house teaching qualification that all unqualified staff were required to undertake. The reason for this department's low standing in the League Table was that staff attending this course were given around thirty hours off their annual teaching target. As a result, few, if any, completed the certificate and, consequently, success rates were low. The manager concerned went off on long-term sickness and absence following this meeting. It wasn't clear how these circumstances could be accommodated through weighting criteria.

The ideological conflict between democratic and egalitarian conceptualisations of education and the forces of quasi-marketisation manifests itself here in human disease. Unsurprisingly, in the context of a quasi-market, bodily and mental health are aspects of individual performance to be monitored by the College's HRM department. As such, a poor health record is likely to generate negative statistics that may impact on the career of an individual.

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Rob Smith started his career teaching English in Secondary Schools in Birmingham, West Midlands. A decade of working in the FE sector involved him in the industrial relations issues of the time as a trade union (NATFHE) activist. His doctorate is based on what happened in the sector at this time. He works is now a Post Compulsory Education Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Wolverhampton.

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