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“Doing a Neave”: Reflections on the Evaluative State, Academic Standards, and Blind Mice¹

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Over his illustrious career Professor Guy Neave has contributed a large number of seminal writings to the field of higher education. His concept of the “evaluative state” clearly identified a signal change in the history of higher education policy. Governments that traditionally had monitored inputs to universities as part of their fiduciary obligation to the public and occasionally had assessed the strategic direction of higher education (e.g., the Robbins Report), were now widely adopting for the first time *a posteriori* analyses. These attempts to evaluate the actual outputs or outcomes of universities were usually justified as a concern with efficiency and effectiveness in the new context of mass higher education.

Many of the subsequent analyses of the evaluative state have appropriately questioned the capacity of policymakers and their designated representatives to make valid assessments about university performance, particularly in the area of academic quality. This criticism stands on firm theoretical ground reflecting the well known principal-agent model first articulated by organisational economists. That is, the principal (the government) finances universities to provide public goods that might be undersupplied by the private market. Because these agents (universities) are not subject to truly competitive markets, the principal must monitor their performance to assure the public interest. However, information imperfections make external monitoring difficult and inefficiency likely. In the case of universities a lack of valid information about the academic standards of academic programs - that is the added educational value they provide to the student and ultimately to society - effectively “blinds” the principal and leads to predictable government failures.

What is less often acknowledged, however, is that in the new global and massified environment of higher education, imperfect information also effectively blinds the other potential evaluators of higher education, the market and the university, itself. This suggests the problem confronting higher education and society is more complex than that of the blind, evaluative state. It is the problem of the three blind mice of higher education - the state, the market, and the university.

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The Blind State

The tools of the evaluative state have included new forms of external quality assurance such as subject assessments, academic audits, and program accreditations, as well as contractual instruments such as performance funding. Research on these new policy instruments has revealed limitations with each, problems predictable from the perspective of principal agent theory. For example, the process of subject assessments as implemented in the UK was captured by former school inspectors and therefore came to reflect their professional interests rather than those of the larger public. Consequently the assessments focused on direct inspections of teaching and thereby sometimes encouraged pedagogical conventions rather than the improvement of academic standards. Program accreditation as implemented in Europe, similar to subject assessments, is a comprehensive process and therefore highly costly in faculty time and effort if regularly repeated. Because of their focus on subject fields, both program accreditations and subject assessments also fail to strengthen collective institutional responsibility for maintaining and assuring academic standards. In contrast, academic audits were designed to evaluate institutional-level processes rather than subject fields, and are therefore an inherently less costly external quality assurance mechanism. But because of information imperfections audits also may suffer from misdirection, for example placing too much emphasis on assessing institutional policy documents or administrative and governance processes, rather than evaluating the effectiveness of core academic processes known to influence academic standards. Each of these external quality assessments has had some positive impacts, primarily in encouraging greater discussion and debate about improving academic quality and quality assurance within programs and institutions. But the challenges of conducting valid external assessments of academic standards also have encouraged a wasteful “culture of compliance.” Administrators and academic staffs have often responded to external quality assessments with superficial actions, such as creating formal policy documents or visible quality assurance committees and/or quality assurance offices, rather than taking the more significant steps necessary to improve academic standards.

The newest instrument for evaluating university performance is performance funding. As with external quality assessments the major limitation of performance funding policies is inadequate data and measurements of the value added by educational programs. Performance funding measures still tend to rely upon existing input and process-oriented indicators of academic quality. As a consequence performance funding policies as currently designed have had minimal influence on the quantity or quality of student learning.

In sum this evidence of the blindness of the evaluative state has motivated many observers to advocate the use of true market competition as a means of assuring the public interest in maintaining and assuring academic standards.

The Blind Market

In an effort to increase the efficiency of their higher education systems, many countries have attempted to stimulate greater market competition among universities through quasi-markets for state funded instruction and research. But market efficiency is also dependent upon the availability of appropriate information on both price and quality. With many goods and services, a lack of needed consumer information on

quality will offer a market opportunity for commercial entities to provide the needed information. This has also occurred in higher education as many publishers rushed to fill the void in academic quality information by providing university league tables and guides designed to inform student consumers. However, commercial league tables and guides also suffer from information imperfections and when combined with the demonstrated nature of student choice in mass higher education the evidence suggests that the evaluative market also suffers from blindness.

As already noted the challenge and cost of developing valid indicators of the educational value added by academic programs are significant and for-profit publications have little motivation to make such investments. Instead they enjoy substantial sales and influence among opinion leaders, higher achieving students, and even university personnel by focusing on readily available and/or highly subjective indicators of academic prestige such as reputational surveys and financial or student inputs.

These indicators of academic prestige tend to obscure the weaker signals of the quality of teaching and student learning and as a consequence the aggressive pursuit of prestige in more competitive markets crowds out activities associated with the improvement of academic standards. Because of the flawed indicators utilised in commercial rankings, universities in a number of countries are making costly investments calculated to enhance their international prestige, such as recruitment efforts and merit awards designed to “cream skim” the student market as well as new PhD programs, research facilities, and the hiring of highly visible researchers.

This “market failure” demonstrates that legitimate information on academic quality is a true public good that will be undersupplied by commercial entities. As a consequence both government and non-profit agencies in countries such as Australia, the UK, Germany, and the US have been motivated to subsidise the provision of more valid and reliable information on the quality of academic programs for student consumers. While these efforts have helped correct some of the limitations of commercially provided information on higher education, they are unlikely to make the evaluative market less blind. High achieving students, who are the group most likely to be influenced by league tables, select universities based primarily upon indicators of academic reputation rather than valid measures of the quality of teaching and learning in academic programs. They believe - correctly - that graduation from these institutions will provide a signal to society that assures their future financial status. Other students choose universities for a wide variety of reasons including consumption benefits that they value personally, but which may ultimately produce limited benefit to society. These include the pleasures of living in attractive university surroundings, the appeal of university social life, and in the US the distractions of university athletics.

In sum, students in mass systems of higher education increasingly choose universities primarily for the private benefits they will receive, not because of the social benefits that an effective education may eventually provide society. The rational choices of even better informed student consumers are therefore unlikely to create sufficient pressure for universities to improve academic standards.

The Blind University

The observable blindness of the evaluative state and the evaluative market lead many to conclude that the only effective means of assuring academic standards is the

university itself. Unfortunately information imperfections within institutions of higher education have contributed to the blindness of the university as an evaluative instrument as well.

As Sir Eric Ashby candidly observed in 1963:

All over the country these groups of scholars, who would not make a decision about the shape of a leaf or the derivation of a word or the author of a manuscript without painstakingly assembling the evidence, make decisions about admission policy, size of universities, staff-student ratios, content of courses, and similar issues, based on dubious assumptions, scrappy data, and mere hunch (Ashby 1963, p. 93).

Some forty year later Don Anderson and his colleagues in Australia surveyed university administrators about how they evaluated the academic standards of their universities:

... when we asked how they knew, there was no VC or dean who had any valid or reliable means of knowing about the intellectual standards of their university's degrees, e.g. how they might have changed over time, how they compared between departments or how they compared with other universities' (Anderson et al. 2002, p. 36).

Of the many external quality assurance practices external examining, as conducted in the UK and some Scandinavian countries, most clearly assesses academic standards. External examiners traditionally assessed the actual performance of students on subject examinations used to award honours degrees in UK universities. However, the practice was not regulated nor codified until, under pressure from the government to assure academic standards, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals published the first Code of Practice in 1986. Subsequent research revealed that only a minority of universities were following these professional standards, challenging academic assertions on the effectiveness of the practice.

The numerous academic audits conducted in many countries have also publicly revealed the limitations in the evaluation processes universities employ to assure academic standards. The Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in the US now conducts arguably the most valid academic audits, featuring evidence-based assessments of quality assurance processes in university education programs. Their assessors have been consistently surprised to discover that while university academic staff are clearly well trained in research inquiry they have not been systematically applying those methods to their academic courses and programs.

With the rising world-wide incentives for academic staff to invest more time and effort in research than teaching, the increasing demands from students for higher marks and grades, along with the widespread adoption of modular instruction and continuous assessment, the limitations of existing university processes for evaluating academic standards have become more obvious.

Conclusion

The blindness exhibited by the evaluative state, market, and university requires I believe limited state interventions to improve the evaluative capacity of the market and most especially the university. This would require first the state subsidising the costs of producing quality information of demonstrated value both to students choosing an academic program and to universities and their academic staffs seeking to improve academic standards. Second, it would require an ongoing program of valid external academic audits, which are designed to assure that all universities have in place evidence-based internal processes for assuring the quality of their education provision. Such external evaluations are warranted because those universities that have made some measurable progress in improving the assurance of their academic standards have done so only after receiving well-targeted external quality assessments. And as a process originally designed by the academic community, audits are superior to other external assessments in their clear and necessary assumption that universities themselves are responsible for assuring their academic standards.

In short given the acknowledged limitations of the evaluative state, market and university, I have concluded that an academic or quality audit approach offers the most responsible way for addressing the problem posed by the three blind mice of higher education. However, the term academic or quality audit clearly evokes discomfort within the university community, likely because of its connotation of a financial investigation. So I would like to offer the modest proposal that we replace the terms “an academic or quality audit” with “a Neave,” as in “doing a Neave.” That is, an external evaluation process that would encourage academic staff to actively discuss and debate the essentials of higher education would, in my view, simply institutionalise the role that Professor Neave has played with erudition, wit, and an obvious *joie de vivre* throughout his professional career.

References

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