

Achieving ‘Settlement’:

Negotiation of New National ‘Quality’ Policy for Higher Education in a Context of Globalisation

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The establishment of the national Australian Universities’ Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2001 represents a new ‘settlement’ on quality policy in Australian higher education. This paper elucidates key negotiations between major stakeholder groups over the production of this new quality policy text, and it emphasises the political dynamics involved as the national policy text accommodates pressures from both ‘global’ and ‘local’ levels. The central core of the paper is based on empirical data gathered through interviews with members of the new AUQA Board. The AUQA members’ perspectives of global and international influences, national policy production processes, and early institutional responses are reported and analysed within the context of the literature and practice in this area internationally. It is important to emphasise that this paper reflects only one set of perspectives, and that there will inevitably be alternative interpretations of the policy process from different groups of policy actors, as further highlighted in the final discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the national Australian Universities’ Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2001 was the result of the continuing development of policy on how to assess and further quality in Australian higher education. Other elements include the establishment of the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework and the development of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. The focus in this paper will be AUQA. New quality policy for Australian higher education of the 2000s represents a metamorphosis from Australia’s first such policy of the early 1990s. Not only are the policy parameters different in significant ways, but the reaction of the sector is also significantly different, to the extent that overt resistance to earlier quality reviews of 1993 to 1995 has largely transformed into enthusiasm by (many) universities to be audited sooner rather than later. At a minimum, universities are acceding to audits in a way which was barely imaginable less than a decade before. The policy discourses and power relationships are changing. Why and how, and who are the key players?

In attempting to begin to answer this question, this paper examines the process of quality policy 'settlement' for Australian higher education of the early 2000s. It elucidates key negotiations between major stakeholder groups over the production of this new quality policy text, and it emphasises the political dynamics involved as the national policy text accommodates pressures from both 'global' and 'local' (individual institutional) levels. The central core of the paper is based on empirical data gathered through interviews with members of the new AUQA Board which began auditing universities in 2002. Their perspectives of global and international influences, national policy production processes and early institutional responses are reported and analysed. It is important to emphasise that this is only one set of perspectives, and that there will inevitably be alternative interpretations of the policy process from different groups of policy actors, as further highlighted in the final discussion.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections which focus in turn on global contexts for quality policy in higher education; empirical data from interviews with Australian quality agency board members about the dynamics of national quality policy 'settlement'; locating the negotiated Australian quality policy text in 'time' (comparisons with the 1990s) and in 'space' (comparisons with the global scene); and a concluding discussion which offers a meta level analysis of emergent themes.

GLOBAL CONTEXTS FOR 'QUALITY' POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

'Quality' has become a global policy discourse, across private and public sectors including education. The multiple and often contradictory discourses which constitute the phenomenon of 'quality', however, render its definition problematic. In particular, notions of 'quality' as 'excellence'; as 'standards setting' (eg International Organisation for Standardisation – ISO – accreditation); as 'quality assurance' or QA (usually associated with a set of management processes adopted to satisfy external stakeholders); and as 'quality improvement' or QI (with a more internal, developmental orientation) are often conflated in policy documents, in practice and in the literature (Sachs, 1994; Vidovich, 2001).

It is argued here that many policies on quality in education amount to mechanisms of accountability or indirect steerage which have developed as the 'complement' to policies of devolution, decentralisation and deregulation characteristic of New Public Management and a prevailing market ideology in the public sector. In education, the upsurge in quality (accountability) policies has been described as evidence of a 'culture of performativity' (Ball, 2000), a 'regime of power' (Morley, 2001) and a 'mechanism of surveillance' (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, 2001). However, quality policies in education can also be understood as part of the century-old international standardisation process to further world trade, communication and the 'interpenetration' of industries. In this sense, the 'craft of teaching' and the 'public administration of education systems' are being drawn into the globalising world of work (<http://www.iso.ch/iso/en/ISOOnline>).

Quality policy and globalisation rose to prominence in educational discourses at the same time during the 1990s. One might hypothesise that quality policy has become an instrument in setting the parameters for education in response to the phenomenon of globalisation. In higher education, the increasing global orientation of quality assurance has been associated with the movement towards mass higher education and concerns about maintaining standards, as highlighted by John Randall, a key player in quality policy in the UK: "Transition to mass higher education is a global phenomenon. ... In a borderless higher education system, approaches to defining standards and recognising qualifications are, increasingly, global" (Randall, 2002, p. 190). In announcing the new quality policy for Australian higher education of the 2000s Commonwealth Minister Kemp emphasised the global imperative: "Australia is part of a global community delivering higher education and the increased emphasis on quality assurance is a global phenomenon" (Kemp, 1999, p. 5).

Globalisation has been defined as "a process leading to greater interdependence and mutual awareness (reflexivity) among economic, political and social units in the world, and among actors in general" (Guillen, 2000, p. 3). Similarly Marginson and Rhoades (2002, p. 288) refer to "the shrinkage of distance and time delays in communications and travel, leading to increasingly extensive and intensive global relations". They define globalisation as "the development of increasingly integrated systems and relationships beyond the nation states", and they emphasise that such relationships include economic, technological, cultural and political dimensions.

Henry et al. (2001) point to a possible global 'model' of quality policy in higher education urged on by international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and World Bank. The essence of this 'model' is self-evaluation by universities; a meta level of assessment independent of government; peer review including site visits from external experts; reporting of results, without rankings, in either published or confidential form; and no direct relationship between performance and funding to avoid a compliance culture. In the next section of the paper the focus shifts from the global level to one particular country – Australia – and the way in which both 'the global' and 'the local' have been incorporated into a national quality policy 'settlement' for higher education in the 2000s.

THE DYNAMICS OF NATIONAL QUALITY POLICY 'SETTLEMENT': PERSPECTIVES FROM THE AUSTRALIAN QUALITY AGENCY

This section is concerned to elucidate the dynamic processes involved in achieving a new 'settlement' on quality policy in Australian higher education for the 2000s. The five subsections follow the temporal sequence of policy negotiation over the period 1999 to 2001, as reported during interviews with just over half of the AUQA Board in late 2001 and early 2002. The seven respondents included the AUQA Chair, Executive Director and representatives of all the major constituencies on the Board – that is, the Commonwealth and State governments as well as the university sector. Board members who work in

industry and who were appointed by governments were included in the sample. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted by phone, given the geographic dispersion of respondent locations across four States of Australia. Respondents were sent the core interview questions in advance and these questions were further developed as interviews progressed according to the different experiences of respondents. Interviews were taped and transcribed with the permission of the respondents. Quotes from respondents are interspersed throughout this section to provide a greater sense of the 'trustworthiness' of the data and a greater depth of understanding of the policy processes involved.

Forging international markets for higher education

Interviews with AUQA Board members revealed a total consensus amongst the respondent group on the importance of international markets as the major stimulus for new quality policy. Respondents explained in terms such as "Australia is a major exporter of education and there was a major question about the quality of that education internationally" and "I don't think universities would choose to do this. I think they are doing it because they want a mechanism to guarantee their international standing".

In addition, there were concerns about both on-line education and the growth of private educational providers in the late 1990s. As one respondent explained: "If we are going to diversify the providers, we will have to set up a climate in which there are very strong standards underpinning entry to the market. ... This [quality policy] is partly a response to the growth in on-line provision worldwide".

AUQA Board members argued that the impetus towards an Australian system of quality auditing was accelerated by the fact that major competitors in the global higher education marketplace, especially the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ), had permanent quality agencies in place during the 1990s as a form of *de facto* guarantee to customers that minimum standards could be assured, and therefore Australia needed such an agency. As one respondent expressed it: "The absence of quality audit within Australian universities compared to the presence of quality audits in say the UK and NZ was a major concern". Thus, the development of an Australian system of quality audits was becoming inevitable in the minds of key national policy makers during 1999 and the search for appropriate models from other countries was initiated, as outlined in the next section.

International models for quality policy in higher education

In the development of a model for quality policy in Australian higher education, 'parallel' models for quality policy from international sources were actively examined. The Commonwealth Government commissioned reports from two separate university-based research groups on approaches to quality policy internationally, especially in the UK, mainland Europe, the United States of America (USA) and NZ. The Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) both produced position papers drawing on reviews of the international quality scene.

The UK approach was seen by national policy actors as one to be avoided rather than emulated, especially because several universities in the UK were refusing to participate in the Quality Assurance Agency inspectorial-style audits at that time. The implications for Australia were clear: "There's a lot of nervousness within the Australian system about an intrusive approach". Models from the USA and Europe were also deemed inappropriate, according to the Minister:

Any new framework should take into account our federal structure, our universities and our history rather than slavishly adopting a British Model (with its expense and intrusiveness), a US model (which involves industry regulation within a very diverse system) or a European model (with close links between universities and the state). (Kemp, 1999, p. 6)

Ultimately, it was NZ which provided the closest model for new Australian quality policy. All respondents noted the significant influence of NZ, although they pointed to some differences between the NZ and Australian contexts. The NZ system is much smaller and less diverse, with only seven universities compared to 38 in Australia, which renders the whole auditing process easier and faster. NZ does not have the more complex federal structure of Australia in which both Commonwealth and State governments have interests in education. NZ universities are not self-accrediting as with established Australian universities, but rather government accredited. Finally, the NZ Academic Audit Unit is owned by the NZ Vice-Chancellors' Committee whereas the AUQA has status as an independent company in Australia with the shareholders being the Commonwealth and all State governments. Respondents emphasised that given these contextual differences, the Australian approach to quality audits needed to be adapted to Australian circumstances.

In the event, with the establishment of AUQA, the NZ influence became even more direct in that the key policy parameters, the audit manual, the AUQA Executive Director (from the Academic Audit Unit of NZ), as well as other staff appointments to the AUQA office all came from NZ. The AUQA Executive Director had written the audit manual for NZ and actually used that as a template for the Australian manual, although all respondents in this study were at pains to point out that it was not adopted without some review and minor modifications. Respondents also pointed out that in Australia, compared to NZ, quality policy is less focused on detail and more on general principles, less on processes and more outcomes, and overall it is less intrusive to the institutions.

It is important to highlight that international influences on the development of quality policy are not simply one-way, as there is also evidence of Australia making an impact in other countries. For example, respondents were aware of extensive invitations within the first year of AUQA (before audits even began) for the AUQA Chair and Executive Director to visit places such as the UK, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Brazil and

Mexico to explain the Australian quality auditing system which, according to the Executive Director, was already held in high regard internationally, and was being heralded as a possible model for other countries to 'borrow'.

In addition to these inter-national, bi-lateral interactions between individual countries in promulgating analogous models of quality policy across the globe, there is also the effect of international organisations and associations. One example cited by most respondents was the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (founded in 1993) which provides a medium for inter-national exchanges of approaches. David Woodhouse, who took up the position as Executive Director of AUQA in 2001, had just completed a four year term as the President of this international association, and he would continue during his first years in the AUQA position as Immediate Past President, thereby potentially bringing Australia into sharper focus on the international scene. One of the issues which interests INQAAHE and Woodhouse personally is 'reciprocal recognition'. During interview, David Woodhouse explained that this involves "quality assurance agencies mutually recognising what each other does so as to reduce the number of hoops that institutions have to go through as they look internationally", and that moves in this direction had been initiated between Australia and NZ. Such mutual recognition, however, may create pressures towards homogenisation of quality policy across national boundaries, and furthermore, it may interfere with wider political agendas of governments (eg negotiation of free trade agreements).

Interestingly, the OECD was not identified by AUQA respondents as a major influence on the development of new Australian quality policy, despite the fact that it sponsored a forum and paid for international speakers from the Netherlands and NZ to address an Australian Vice-Chancellors' workshop on the new ministerial quality policy. The next section moves the focus from global contexts to identify the key quality policy stakeholder groups within Australia.

Stakeholder coalitions in Australia (1999)

The key stakeholder groups for quality policy in Australian higher education were governments (Commonwealth and all States of Australia); universities; and to a lesser extent, business/industries. Interactions between stakeholders towards achieving policy 'settlement' were made more complex by the fact that none of these groups is homogeneous. The Commonwealth, which has funded universities since the 1970s, and various State governments, which provide for the legal establishment of universities, can operate separately or through MCEETYA, a council consisting of all the ministers responsible for education across the country. In addition, the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST)¹ operates in the domain of quality policy in the form of requiring quality improvement plans for Commonwealth funding as part of annual profile negotiations with individual universities, and also by publishing annual quantitative performance indicators across the sector. Each State has an Office of Higher

Education which is largely concerned with accreditation of those institutions which are not the traditional self-accrediting universities. Different States have conducted their accreditation function in different ways. Thus, 'government' interests in higher education quality policy are complex.

Just as 'government' interests are not homogeneous, nor are 'university' interests. Increasingly distinct divisions of the higher education sector are appearing. The 'Group of Eight', traditional research-intensive universities and the 'Australian Technology Network' of five former Institutes of Technology are examples of formalised subgroupings. Other distinct groupings are the 'new wave' universities founded in the 1960s/70s, the former colleges of advanced education which originated as teachers' colleges, and regional universities. There are also a number of private institutions, and the potential for a rapid increase in on-line providers. This is anything but a homogenous system of higher education where all institutions have interests in common, and therefore different types of universities have vested interests in producing different types of quality policy texts.

Businesses and industries have been coopted into quality policy processes in Australian higher education through invitations from governments. Most of those involved from the industry sector have extensive experience of quality assurance, quality management and ISO standardisation in the corporate world and therefore bring a different set of quality discourses to the table. The inaugural AUQA Board includes members from a range of 'other industries' such as aviation, engineering and a scientific research organisation.

Each set of stakeholders is a loose coalition or a potentially unstable grouping of interests around 'governments', 'universities' and 'business/industries'. Interestingly, 'customers' – the supposed *raison d'être* of new quality policy within a marketing ideology – are not formally represented as one of the stakeholder groups. The following section focuses on how potentially unstable coalitions of stakeholder groups forged a 'settlement' on new quality policy for the 2000s.

Getting to 'yes' – negotiations between Australian stakeholder groups (1999)

During 1999, the various stakeholder groups were seeking a 'settlement' over new quality policy purportedly 'in the national interest' of forging markets for Australian higher education overseas. As one respondent explained: "A genuinely national system was the only thing that was acceptable in the international marketplace. We were really struggling with the fact that States were looking after the quality of entry, but the Commonwealth appeared to be looking after the quality of existing players. ... All the governments are equally interested in it".

The following extended quote from a respondent representing university interests points to the need for compromise to achieve policy 'settlement,' and it also highlights the negotiations between the AVCC and the States to circumvent the Commonwealth's potentially powerful position in dictating policy. The role of interpersonal relationships

is significant in these negotiations. As this respondent indicated, there was some skilful political bargaining going on:

The AVCC had to move away from its original position on quality which was that it was the institution's business and there was no need for any national regulation of it. That was no longer sustainable as a policy position. We could either sit there holding on to this position and have the minister come forward with a policy which we didn't like at all, or we could be more proactive. Basically the AVCC agreed to reverse its policy position. After a great debate and a great deal of drama that was agreed. The AVCC proposed a company owned by the universities, but I never thought for a moment that the Minister would buy that. Our major aim was to stop a Commonwealth instrumentality. ... I knew that the States would be just as concerned about the Commonwealth owning the model because universities are State bodies. I am personal friends with two of the State bureaucrats involved. We talked with the States. The major aim was to stop the Commonwealth from absolutely imposing its views on both the universities and the States. There was quite a bit of adept politicking.

Although the States are not a homogeneous grouping, their common interests with regard to accreditation of 'their' universities were brought into sharp focus over the well publicised issue of accrediting a particular private, on-line provider (Greenwich University): "God could not have been kinder. There was the brilliant example of Greenwich which did a lot of things for us. It showed us that we didn't want Australian universities that looked like that. It made it very easy to line the States up".

By late 1999, despite the closeness of a consensus amongst stakeholder groups, the Commonwealth Minister destabilised the whole process by announcing the new policy in a pre-emptive manner at a forum which was meant to workshop the various possibilities for quality policy rather than treat the policy as a *fait accompli*. As one of the key players angrily recalled:

What he announced was almost word for word the work of MCEETYA. ... It had been worked through by the States and Commonwealth over a long period of time. He sat on those studies [research consultancies conducted by Australian academics] and didn't release them. The proper process was to get that work out and then workshop it rather than announce it. ... [Minister] Kemp called a national forum and announced it as if it was Commonwealth policy. To this day my blood boils when people talk about it as something the Commonwealth put in place. It simply didn't.

Despite the mode of conveyance, the announcement of new quality policy by the Minister at the end of 1999, in effect, represented a policy 'settlement' (although not necessarily a stable one) designed to serve the interests of marketing Australian higher education internationally. One respondent emphasised the significance for Commonwealth-State relations: "It's a real strategic achievement in terms of Australian public policy to get this level of agreement between the States and Commonwealth". In the next section the role of the national quality agency in embedding this 'settlement' is examined.

Fine tuning the 'settlement' within the national quality agency (2001)

The national quality agency (AUQA), established in 2001, was to refine the quality policy text and make it workable in universities. Arguably, 'settlement' of quality policy was facilitated by the careful selection of the 'human resources' in the appointments of AUQA Board members, Executive Director and auditors, and by the cooptation of universities into decisions on the minutiae of the policy enactment.

In terms of Board appointments, the Minister was prepared to respond to some disquiet from the university sector that it was underrepresented on AUQA by appointing an extra member from the sector. Board appointments saw the continuation of key people involved in policy 'formulation' from the major stakeholder groups of MCEETYA and AVCC who could carry the spirit of the national 'settlement' through to the operational phase. The Board members appointed by the States were deliberately chosen to balance input from the different States. The particular appointment of the Executive Director appears to have enhanced policy 'settlement' in the early stages as he personified the strong international linkages which have influenced the development of quality policy in Australia. Further, his non-confrontational style and the time he spent visiting universities to explain the process before audits began appears to have minimised some negative reactions from the sector.

Care with the selection of auditors has further embedded the 'settlement', as they operate at the direct interface between AUQA and universities. One respondent kept coming back to this point throughout the interview: "The evaluators have been chosen differently this time. ... The board was very anxious that we did not mirror the sort of evaluators where universities were quite foreign to them. The evaluators have been chosen very carefully".

The cooptation of universities into the early 'enactment' phase of the policy facilitated the settlement of the minutiae of the quality policy process. In the first year of operation of AUQA, before the formal audits began, universities were consulted in a number of ways. For example, a draft audit manual was sent out to universities for comment. Also, trial audits of one State office of higher education then two universities were conducted to render the process more transparent and less threatening, and to suggest that AUQA was prepared to modify the process based on feedback from the sector. AUQA also supported the conduct of mock audits for those universities wanting to prepare for the 'real thing'. Feedback on these exercises was generally neutral to positive from the institutions involved.

Overall, the strategies used to fine tune the 'settlement' were largely shaped in response to the major concerns of universities. In this way, the 'local' level of individual institutions was clearly interacting with national policy making processes, just as the 'global' level had made a significant impact.

LOCATING THE NEGOTIATED AUSTRALIAN QUALITY POLICY TEXT IN 'TIME' AND 'SPACE'

At the end of the process of policy negotiation and 'settlement' analysed in the previous section, what does the quality policy text for Australian higher education of the 2000s look like? Furthermore, how does the policy text compare with what has been before (locating the policy in 'time') and how does it compare with related policies elsewhere across the globe (locating the policy in 'space')?

The Australian Universities' Quality Agency (AUQA) is the centrepiece of the new Australian quality policy. From 2002, it began auditing Australia's 38 publicly funded universities as well as auditing the accreditation function of the various State Offices of Higher Education. AUQA is an independent company with approximately one-third representation from the Commonwealth Government, one-third from the States and one-third from universities. AUQA appoints additional auditors to conduct its assessments of each institution every five years. For the higher education sector this means 8 universities per year are audited. The process involves the production of a public report as an external validation of an initial institutional self-assessment (performance portfolio). The policy seeks to avoid ranking universities and even those interested parties, such as the media, which habitually try to produce education league tables, will meet with difficulties given the narrative style of reports on institutions and the rolling five year cycle of audits. It is a 'whole institutional' approach where judgements are intended to be made against the institution's own mission such that – in theory – a 'fitness for purpose' approach to quality is adopted. Any institution found to be deficient will be required to produce improvement strategies and Commonwealth Government funding may be withdrawn if improvements are not forthcoming.

Since the time of the first quality reviews of the early 1990s, Australian quality policy for higher education has changed in a number of important ways. In terms of the body responsible for auditing and reporting, AUQA is an independent company as opposed to the ministerial committee of the 1990s; the States and private providers are included on the AUQA Board in the 2000s but were not represented in the 1990s; there was no equivalent of an Executive Director position in the 1990s; in the 1990s the Chair of the committee was the chief executive of a university which was audited, whereas as in the 2000s the chair is an ex-Vice-Chancellor; and in the 2000s the AUQA office was staffed by key personnel recruited from overseas which was not the case in the 1990s. Arguably, with these changes the balance of power now lies further outside of the sector than in the 1990s, as reflected in the change of nomenclature from 'review' to 'audit'. This is consistent with a market ideology where the orientation moves away from 'provider capture' in which the locus of control remains within the sector.

In terms of the audit process, the key differences between the 1990s and 2000s are that now there are no rankings (league tables); no marginal funds as 'rewards' to high ranking institutions; State higher education offices are audited as well as universities; audits are conducted every 5 years on each institution instead of annually; and the audit report is published publicly and also sent to the community governing body, as well as

the Vice-Chancellor, of each university. The major differences (removal of rankings and reward funding) relate to accommodating negative reactions from universities over the 1993-95 reviews which revolved around criticisms that the quality policy exacerbated vertical hierarchy within the higher education sector, since all universities seemed to be 'ranked' on the same criteria. This appeared to confer further positional advantage on traditional, elite, research-intensive institutions as they were generally ranked more highly in the league tables emanating from the quality reviews.

In comparing Australian quality policy for higher education with the 'global' model identified by Henry et al. (2001), and outlined earlier in this paper, strong parallels are evident. Quality policy for the 2000s features initial institutional self assessment followed by a meta level of 'peer review' (although arguably the notion of 'peer' here needs some deconstructing) and public reporting, which are all recognisable elements of quality policy in many countries across the globe. The removal of rankings (league tables) and performance funding since the 1990s brings the Australian approach even closer to that in the 'global' model, although this is itself evolving. However, the continuing Australian focus on auditing the 'whole institution' rather than conducting discipline-based reviews (largely on the basis that it is cheaper) continues to set Australia apart from approaches taken in major 'competitor' countries.

This section of the paper reminds us that policies do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they remain static. There are dynamic shifts in policy across time and space, with inherent changing power relationships.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The 'settlement' on Australian higher education quality policy for the early 2000s involved responses to changing global contexts (from 'above') and localised responses to criticisms of the 1990s quality program by universities (from 'below'). New power relationships between interests at these levels are emerging. 'Settlement' has been used in single quotations throughout this paper to avoid the implication that it is a stable and permanent policy solution to growing accountability requirements within the higher education sector. We would argue that Australian quality policy is a temporary 'settlement' based on loose coalitions between key stakeholder interests, and that while these alliances have been sufficient to condense a mutually beneficial policy process in the short term, inherent tensions and contradictions are likely to destabilise this 'settlement' over time.

The following three subsections pick up on some of the meta level themes to emerge from the analysis in this paper. While there is no intention to extrapolate the findings of this study to other contexts, there are some 'bigger picture' issues which suggest themselves for consideration and reflection. These revolve around mechanisms of global policy transfer; the notion of 'hybridity' of organisational forms and functions as a facilitator of national policy 'settlement'; and future directions for research.

Mechanisms of global policy transfer

The extent to which key policy actors sought information internationally as they constructed new quality policy text for Australian higher education of the early 2000s provides clear evidence of what Taylor and Henry (2000 p. 500) have pointed to as a “strengthened international dimension to the knowledge-base needed for policy making”. However, this is not to suggest that national policy making has been rendered redundant or powerless in the face of pressures of globalisation from ‘above’, as evidence presented in this paper points to significant filtration and selection of influences from beyond the nation-state as policy makers actively constructed new policy text. That is, national policy arenas remain important despite pressures from globalisation, consistent with the views of both Rizvi and Lingard (2000) and Taylor and Henry (2000), that the nation-state is redefined but not surrendered.

In delineating specific mechanisms of policy transfer between countries, Dale (1999) draws a distinction between traditional policy borrowing and learning, inter-nationally, and newer mechanisms of policy transfer which are associated with globalisation, where the locus of control moves ‘above’ the level of any individual nation-state to the supranational level. This paper provides ample evidence of traditional inter-national borrowing and learning of quality policy for higher education. Arguably, despite views expressed by commentators such as Levin (1998) that little learning actually occurs with policy transfer between countries, it does seem that Australian policy makers have been careful to ‘learn’ the lessons of the UK in terms of avoiding the negative backlash which accompanied what was perceived as a highly intrusive and expensive quality auditing process in that country. There is also evidence of potential ‘harmonisation’ (as evidenced within the European Union), if not homogenisation, of quality policy promulgated by international organisations such as INQAAHE and the OECD which may take on the status of policy actors in addition to providing forums for discussion (Henry et al. 2001).

Rhoades and Sporn (2002) have described the ‘borrowing’ of QA policy in higher education from the USA to Europe. They explain that in the US, the private sector strongly influenced the development of QA in higher education through mimetic and coercive processes, and then in the transfer from the USA to Europe, professional mechanisms (publications, conferences and consulting) were important. They identified the UK and the Netherlands as playing leading roles in policy transfer through other national governments to national systems of higher education in Europe. Research reported in this paper can add to the policy ‘trail’ in that these same countries – the UK and Netherlands – have been influential in policy transfer to Australia, through both government and academic consultancy routes. It must be emphasised that there has been active selection rather than passive transfer, and that the borrowing and learning have not been limited to unilateral influence; rather two-way reciprocal relationships characteristic of more sophisticated conceptualisations of globalisation (eg Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) are developing. We can now begin to map a ‘global’ transfer of quality policy that resembles a complex policy network, consistent with Henry et al.’s (2001)

notion of 'polycentric policy making'. However, it is well known that Australian education policy is often borrowed from the USA and UK (and also exported at times) and this raises a question about what, if anything, is qualitatively different about policy transfer in an era of globalisation, although this question will not be further explored here.

Hybridity of organisational form and function as a facilitator of national policy 'settlement'

The quality agency – AUQA – as an independent company with representation from the Commonwealth, States and university sector (including private providers), is a 'hybrid' form of organization bringing together major national stakeholder groups (with the exception of student 'customers') purportedly in the interests of forging international markets for higher education. Furthermore, the appointment of Board members from business/industry and the appointment of an Executive Director with extensive international experience have brought broader influences to the 'hybrid'.

The confluence of Commonwealth and State interests in the AUQA hybrid may signal wider changes in the longstanding issue of Commonwealth-State relations in Australian education. Lingard, Porter, Bartlett and Knight (1995) have reported various phases of coercive, corporate and cooperative federalism in Commonwealth-State relationships and arguably new quality policy reflects a corporate and cooperative style of mediation across these different levels of government. Marginson (as cited in Lawham 2002) argues that States should become more involved in higher education, and quality policy appears to be providing a possible entrée for such involvement.

Deem (2001) believes that the notion of hybridisation may offer a useful way of looking at the diversity of organisational forms, practices and cultures with the interactions of local, regional, international and global factors in higher education. One might hypothesise that the hybrid form of AUQA has facilitated a 'settlement' on quality policy as it brings the major players from these different levels to the same 'table', and AUQA is sufficiently removed from direct Commonwealth control to foster a perception of power sharing. Whitty (2002) notes the role of semi autonomous, state-funded organisations which rely on considerable private and voluntary involvement for their operation to apparently depoliticise education, and AUQA may well exemplify such an organisation.

AUQA, then, could be envisaged as a hybrid organization operationalising a hybrid form of accountability. That is, it might be argued that AUQA functions to bring together a complex combination of market and managerial forms of accountability in a way which turns the focus of performativity towards external customers and internal control of universities, simultaneously. New quality policy has been couched in terms of providing information to inform customer choice, including enhancing the perception of market credibility for Australian higher education on the international scene. However, no mechanism has actually been established to deliver this information to the market, aside from individual university reports.

According to AUQA respondents in this study, universities are acceding to national quality audits with less resistance than in the 1990s in order to foster international markets for Australian higher education, but there are other possible interpretations. For example, universities may be opting to support AUQA audits as a less intrusive form of accountability than anything the Commonwealth bureaucracy (DEST) might implement and, in this, they may see AUQA as simply enacting another form of managerial accountability, rather than overseeing a newer form of market accountability. Those who believe that international markets will be enhanced may be disappointed. While positive quality assessments which are available publicly provide an obvious marketing advantage to individual institutions, are the 'customers' sophisticated enough to scrutinise the narrative reports which come out every five years for each institution to make comparative judgements and inform their 'choice'? There is also the issue of whether within an international 'market' for higher education of such huge unmet and growing demand, quality reports, as opposed to government accreditation, are necessary. These alternative interpretations bring into question the whole underlying rationale, as presented in policy documents and emphasised in AUQA interviews, that a national auditing system will enhance international markets for Australian higher education.

Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of market accountability and the reality of reduced Commonwealth funding, governments have not 'backed off' from control of universities. Government-dictated accountability remains omnipresent. A market ideology overlays, rather than replaces, the longer standing managerialism of Australian higher education and together they have the potential to further displace professional and democratic forms of accountability. However, in this complex coupling of market and managerial accountability, arguably AUQA sits within the tensions between deregulation and regulation. Apple (2001) maintains that in the coupling of the market (deregulation) and standardised performance measures (regulation), homogenisation and hierarchy are more likely to be promoted than diversity and innovation. Australian quality policy has the potential to be destabilised by such tensions, and other studies may elucidate how these tensions play out over time. This raises the issue of further research which draws the paper to a conclusion.

Future directions for research

The need for further research as a follow-up to this study is suggested at every turn. The research reported in this paper only begins to answer the why, how and who of changing discourses and power relationships with evolving policy on quality in Australian higher education. To begin, other (non-AUQA) perspectives at the national level – especially from political and bureaucratic players – need to be sought. For example, at the same time that AUQA was being established a new Minister for Education was appointed. Minister Nelson immediately initiated a major review of higher education in 2002 ("Higher Education at the Crossroads"). At the same time there were also a number of changes in the Commonwealth bureaucracy resulting in additions to the portfolio

(science) and the recruitment of new personnel including the Secretary. The “Crossroads” discussion papers produced by the government raised several issues about the recently established higher education quality processes and structures, in particular, whether what had been established was sufficiently rigorous to assess quality and standards of educational outcomes, and whether the processes put in place would only increase the compliance load on institutions. AUQA’s Director (David Woodhouse) responded to these issues in his submission to the discussion paper arguing the strength of the procedures put in place to achieve these things, but also the fact that the agency had only just been established, made it premature to offer authoritative comment on the state of the sector (see submissions to “Crossroads” on www.dest.gov.au/crossroads). These kinds of possibly developing views in the Commonwealth government, as well as the growing experiences of and with AUQA need further exploration.

Perspectives from both more local and more global positions in the policy process under investigation would also provide for interesting triangulation with the viewpoints reported here. Research on ‘customer’ perspectives may offer interesting insights as student customers – both domestic and international – have been relatively ‘unheard’ to date (except possibly inside their institutions). There are also other related political and economic agendas which it would be interesting to explore in terms of how they relate to quality policies, especially those of bodies with overlapping goals such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO) and government departments engaged in free trade discussions that relate to education. Also, organisations with particular agendas such as the Business Higher Education Roundtable and groups within the sector such as the National Tertiary Education Union and postgraduate student associations, all of which have positions and have frequently completed research to support their stands, need further analysis and comparison.

Research on the role of quality policy in the ongoing dynamics of Commonwealth-State relations could be insightful particularly given the ‘joint ownership’ nature of AUQA. Likewise, research on the ongoing dynamics within AUQA may provide insights into hybrid organisations more generally. The current research revealed that at the national level, particular personalities and interpersonal connections were significant in achieving policy ‘settlement’, possibly as important as formally established networks between organizations. The more personal contributions of key individual policy actors might be fruitfully explored in more detail, especially in relation to forming connections in the policy networks between global and local levels.

It is at the local level of individual institutions that the policy ‘settlement’ negotiated nationally could come under considerable strain. Harman (2001) identified four aspects the 1993-95 QA program which were harmful to particular universities as: institutional rankings (league tables) and their publication; the use of performance funding; focus on outcomes as well as processes; and publication of institutional reports. The first two have been removed from quality policy for the 2000s but the latter two remain, suggesting a nucleus for future ‘flashpoints’. Issues of the cost of the audits to institutions (in terms of

both time and money) and the general sense of intrusiveness that were evident in the institutional perspectives of the 1990s (Vidovich & Porter, 1999) are also still relevant. The 'settlement' may well be destabilised as more universities experience their first audits in the period up to 2006, and reactions from the sector are likely to vary considerably both between and within universities. Research within individual universities might also focus on particular departments and individuals as 'global agents' in the form of direct local-global engagement in the international marketplace, as Van Zanten (2001) maintains that the real 'hybridisation' is between local and global levels, with national levels only contributing to the context for these interactions.

It was revealed in this paper that the Australian approach to QA for the 2000s is less 'unique' on the global scene than its approach of the 1990s, especially with the removal of league tables and reward funds. Perhaps we have evidence here of a trend towards greater global homogenisation of quality policy over time, although further research is warranted to examine temporal changes in other countries as the whole phenomenon of quality policy is a 'moving feast'.

This paper has considered only one country – Australia – and the way in which a national 'settlement' on quality policy in higher education was negotiated. There is no intention to extrapolate from Australia to other countries, but to suggest that this 'case study' might provide some useful 'food for thought' elsewhere. Further research is needed to more fully understand the way in which different localised contexts across the globe operate to create different policy 'settlements'. Analysing different cultural contexts is important work in order to demonstrate the variety of human response, to gather ideas about different ways of doing things, and to avoid the application of inappropriate policy 'solutions'. It is highly unlikely that there is 'one best way' in higher education quality policy than in most other aspects of education. In the words of Michael Apple, (2001 p. 419): "dynamics will have their own rhythms and specification in different nations with different histories of their articulations and interactions".

ENDNOTES

- ¹ At the time when new quality policy was being developed in Australia in 1999, DEST was called DETYA – The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs

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