BETWEEN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN A FEDERATED UNIVERSITY:

A PHRONETIC EXPLORATION OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

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I, the undersigned ..... hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The management of quality has deepened remarkably in the domain of higher education in recent decades. In this discourse, analysts demarcate between internal and external aspects to illuminate both policy and practice. These aspects have been overlaid on a continuum with external practices as said to be accountability-driven while internal mechanisms are considered to be more improvement-focused. A continuing unresolved debate is whether these parts may possibly work coherently and effectively together. Using a phronetic framework that considers issues of power, the case of an Irish university is utilized to examine value-rationalities and how these operate under a federated structure with a newly-created external agency. Documents and interviews reveal that notions of accountability and improvement work well together under the Irish quality model by having a focus on the unit level that is balanced with publicly accessible review reports and action plans. The tentative "exemplary knowledge" found, which privileges the expertise of peer reviewers, however, may be compromised by increased autonomy bestowed by recent legislation in Ireland. One key implication is focusing attention on advancing assessment methods in institutional quality offices in Ireland that may potentially re-evaluate the notion of autonomy on the unit level.

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List of Abbreviations

EQA	External Quality Assurance
EUA	European Universities Association
HEA	Higher Education Authority
NUI	National University of Ireland
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
UCD	University College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
USI	Union of Students in Ireland

1. Introduction: Quality in Mass Higher Education

States worldwide have been under multiple pressures to further improve their higher education sectors. On one level, growing social demand and the corresponding expansion of tertiary-level systems have heightened competition between education providers (Martin and Stella 2007, 23). Colleges, universities, and other institutions engaged in postsecondary learning are pushed to show and prove aspects of quality that go above and beyond the traditional measure of prestige. As Morley (2003, 10) notes, "overt market forces, profit motives, and commodification of best value" have increasingly influenced how the dimension of quality has been conceptualized and expressed. While some decry the resulting transformation of students into customers and have done validly so, others also pragmatically accept this new reality in the higher education sector.

On a higher level, globalization, borderless markets, and political moves towards becoming knowledge economies have also profoundly shaped the policy context of higher education into having a sharper focus on the issue of quality (Bazargan 2007; Martin and Stella 2007, 25-26; Morley 2003). Some scholars interpret these international developments as a phenomenon of policy convergence borne out of the pervasive outlook to "indirectly steer"—a distinct approach coming from the new public management wave in policy circles (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2002, 436; Martin and Stella 2007, 24; Perellon 2007, 155). Be that as it may, the debate—largely coming from the perspective of epistemic social science—has not resulted in an agreed model that may be consistently applied across widely differing contexts. Indeed, quality assurance in higher education still remains in flux as

perceptions of quality are continuously evolving and policymakers are still figuring out how to respond to largely competing demands by actors under this domain.

While quality may be defined differently by various stakeholders—making it as not a singular concept (UNESCO 2010, 10)—scholars have proceeded to analyze this area through a systems approach that consists of the various instruments and mechanisms that may or may not be consistent with each other. The underlying goal, as could be gleaned from the literature, is to design and construct a functional and coherent quality management and assurance system both on the national and institutional levels. As the debate detailed below shows, the functions and instruments utilized across systems are not simple complements that fit perfectly together but could also contend or compete with each other.

1.1 External and Internal Quality Management

Analyses of quality assurance commonly distinguish between the external and internal components of this regulatory regime (see Bazargan 2007; Bornmann, Mittag, and Danie 2006; Haris 2013; Harvey and Williams 2010b; Martin and Stella 2007; Mehralizadeh et al. 2007; Newton 1999; Rosa and Teixeira 2014; Shah 2013; Stumbrys 2004). On one hand, internal quality assurance pertains to the "policies and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular." On the other hand, external quality assurance would refer to "actions of an external body, which may be a quality assurance agency or any body other than the institution that assesses its operation or that of its programmes, in order to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards" (Martin and Stella 2007, 34). Between these two aspects, Stensaker and Leiber (2015, 328) argue that the "rise and scope of external

quality assurance (EQA) in higher education" is "one of the most remarkable developments within the sector during the latter decades." This probably has led some, namely Kogan and Hanney (2000 in Morley 2003, 15), to note that, "no area of public policy has been subjected to such radical changes over the last 20 years as higher education." Crosier and Parveva (2013, 46) explain this change particularly in the European context under the Bologna process:

> "Whereas institutions were previously 'supervised' directly by the state, the steering mechanisms now are much more likely to involve QA agencies. Moreover, just as there has been increasing convergence towards particular models of degree structures, so too there appears to have been convergence towards a particular model of external QA."

In the period when external quality assurance was still on the rise, one early goal of analysts was, as previously mentioned, to find a universal model that may be applicable across various tertiary education systems. Billing (2004), in comparing quality assurance frameworks in higher education, did not detect a "general model" that could universally apply but noticed common elements that exist in most countries. Moreover, he notes that the deviations from the general model are determined by "practicalities, the size of the higher education sector, the rigidity/flexibility of the legal expression of quality assurance (or the absence of enshrinement in law), and the stage of development from state control of the sector." Recently, Wells (2014, 21) shares the same conclusion from an examination of the evolutions of quality assurance in Africa, the Arab states, the Asia-Pacific, and Europe in that, although these systems may vary in design and structure, that, nonetheless, these "share the same basic quality assurance DNA." He further adds that what is critical is for quality to be ensured as "a continuous process and not a static goal."

One other unresolved topic of concern is the effective functional and structural organization of quality assurance. Martin and Stella (2007, 104) enumerate possible forms of quality assurance as being between accreditation, assessment, and audit, with the last being described as focused on quality control systems on the institutional level. Szanto (2010 in Hou et al. 2015, 97) goes much further with proposing a four-tiered model for quality assurance in higher education:

> "At the first level, higher education institutions need to develop an internal quality assurance mechanism for self-assessment. Quality assurance agencies conduct an external review at the institutional and program levels, and this is the second level. The third involves recognition bodies aiming to recognize quality assurance agencies in terms of professionalism, resources, independence, self-enhancement mechanisms, etc. In most countries, a Department of Education plays the role of recognition body. Few countries set up an independent recognition organization to review quality assurance agencies externally. International quality assurance networks are considered the final quality guardians to ''review the reviewers,'' that is, they scrutinize agency reviewers to see whether reviews are conducted in an appropriate manner and in adherence to international standards."

Scholars, however, find the structural configurations of this system less interesting and are moving more towards analyzing the processes, dynamics, and motivations that underpin these arrangements. One identified tension in the literature, recalling the external and internal dichotomy, comes from overlaying these dimensions over an improvement and accountability continuum that, some observers advance, correspond to each other in practice (see Genis 2002; Kells 1995 in Billing 2004, 114; Woodhouse 2004 in Hou et al. 2015).

1.2 Improvement in Tension with Accountability

Kahsay (2012, 39) finds that the debate in quality assurance's emphasis on either accountability or improvement remains unresolved. This dichotomy, the author writes, "between external (accountability-oriented) and internal (improvement-oriented) quality assurance exercises is a matter of how the exercise is initiated, who owns the practice and the

resulting effect on higher education institutions." He goes on to argue that the tension between these two is "related to power relations between the different stakeholders of higher education" and that student learning is actually enhanced through the internal approach (Kahsay 2012, 65).

On the need for accountability, on the other hand, especially in transition countries for instance, governments are asked to show that "funds are well spent, that the institutions are efficient, and that institutions are productive" (Layzell 1998 in Hendel and Lewis 2005, 248; Zusman 2005). Adding further credit to having an external focus, Dill (2000 in Harvey and Williams 2010a, 8) finds that audits have "helped initiate development of quality assurance systems within institutions; put the improvement of teaching and learning on institutional agendas; reinforced institutional leaders in their efforts to develop institution-wide quality cultures; provided system-wide information on best practices; and offered visible confirmation to the public that attention is being paid to academic quality assurance." Much of this evidence would tend to convince one that the rise of external agencies in the higher education sector has brought invaluable improvements to this domain.

The involvement of external agencies, however, has not been smooth in the sense that they may be easily applied to previous arrangements nor to differing contexts as mentioned. Parry (2002, 5), for one, poses the question whether these external functions are consistent with pre-existing internal mechanisms. Mhlanga (2008, iii) contend that one direct consequence of the external focus that is "more concerned with standardization of procedures than with enhancement of academic practice" has not "resulted in the self-improvement of institutions." Harvey and Williams (2010a, 3), in a review of the literature on quality, also submit that the "proliferation of quality-assurance agencies is being followed by a mushrooming of

qualifications frameworks and the growing pressure to accredit everything, even if it is a poor means of assuring quality and encouraging improvement."

In contrast, Danø and Stensaker (2007; 2009) take a more nuanced position in forwarding that external quality assurance may at the same time stimulate but could also create obstacles for institutional improvement. The Nordic countries in the 1990s, they argue, are exemplars in striking a balance between these two but whether their governments have maintained this over time is another question, they admit, that needs further answering.

Other scholars have increasingly questioned the dichotomy itself. Stensaker (2003 in Kis 2005, 13) has criticized this demarcation as a "simplified view on how change in higher education occurs" and stated that this has led to the implication where "internal processes are related to improvement, while external processes are associated with accountability." Thune (1996 in Kis 2005, 12) argues too that accountability and quality improvement may be balanced together despite the methods utilized under them are perceived as conflicting. Boyd and Fresen (2004 in Kahsay 2012, 39) concur with this position in stating that internal and external approaches are "not mutually exclusive but are both essential, in relative proportions, for a successful quality assurance system." They also explicitly point out that the equilibrium between these mechanisms is also mediated by the institutional quality culture. Vroeijenstijn (2008, 1 in Hou et al. 2015, 97), furthermore, forwards that internal and external quality activities are, in fact, "two sides of the same coin that the activities are inextricably interrelated."

Nevertheless, the two sides affect each other in different ways. A recent survey by the European Association for Quality assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) reveals that only 65 percent of agencies have complied with accountability standards and concludes that

internal quality assurance mechanisms are still developing (ENQA 2010 in Hou et al. 2015). Jackson (1997, 51) writes that the establishment of these mechanisms on the institutional level as mandated by an external agency could possibly "open up a range of new approaches and possible relationships between institutional quality assurance systems and processes, and external agencies with responsibilities for providing public assurance." Corresponding to these are also changes in the relationships between the state and the higher education sector. Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002) describe possible shifts wherein "the phase model of quality assurance systems development can be seen as a model of the evolving relations between higher education and the state, from one-to-one control mechanisms to more complex and presumably more effective forms of accountability, where concepts as academic excellence and autonomy take on a new meaning." They continue with a call for a next generation of quality assurance systems that these external dynamics necessitate.[1]

Following the arguments above, this research project hopes to make a small contribution to the debate through exploring how different institutional structures and configurations of power may affect the administration of quality. As arrangements to assess and advance quality grow in complexity, there is a need to interrogate these shifting relations and how they affect commonly held notions that give the system credibility and legitimacy. While most studies reviewed above either focus on the programme, subject, department/faculty, or institution (Billing 2004, 188), other archetypal forms of academic organizations have escaped examination. A case in point would be federated universities where constituent units,

[1] Apart from the employed instruments, scholars have also pointed to the impact of the political context (e.g. Gornitzka and Stensaker 2014) and have raised questions regarding purposes of assurance as to how these shape definitions of quality. Some enumerated purposes include "social accountability, academic improvement, institutional performance efficiency and effectiveness, 'value for money' and 'consumer' protection'" (Singh 2010, 193). Moreover, Dill (2010, 160) asks "what clues can we divine from recent experiments in external quality assurance that will help policymakers design and implement framework conditions that more effectively provide incentives and support for the needed reforms within universities?"

as another bureaucratic layer, may be instructive in understanding this evolving policy area as most studies have largely imagined post-secondary institutions as centralized bureaucracies with a singular hierarchy located on a single campus. Baldridge et al. (1977, 368) raised this problem early on in stating, "Most studies of academic governance have been extremely narrow in scope, often ignoring the complexity of the system." By introducing another layer to the analysis and using a framework that perceives beyond the structural elements, this research aims to uncover new meanings and tactics that may be possibly diffused across to other quality management systems. The task of the succeeding chapter, then, is to outline this study's framework and research design that lays the groundwork for the empirical findings and analysis contained in succeeding chapters.

2. Analytical Framework and Research Design

In the previous chapter, the ongoing debate between internal and external mechanisms in quality assurance in higher education was explored. While analysts remain divided on how exactly to strike a balance between these two aspects—that is, in pursuit of a prescriptive or universal model for policymakers—the argument that will be forwarded here discusses a perspective wherein the particularities of a higher education sector and its context would be the primary considerations in designing an effective quality management system. To do this, one avenue could be is to attend to issues and differences of power and values between the various stakeholders involved in the quality assurance process.

2.1 Higher Education Quality as a Political Arena

Compared with the rationalist, instrumental, and managerial outlooks that pervade the literature on quality assurance in higher education, many observers suggest that the issue at hand is, in reality, a political battleground between and among actors in this sector (see, for example, Harvey and Williams 2010a; Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2002; Kahsay 2012; Martin and Stella 2007). Brennan (1997 in Billing 2004, 120) suggests, based on a comparison of frameworks in Australia, Denmark, and Sweden, that "debates about quality assessment are frequently debates about power and change…" More than that, external quality assurance is also suggested to affect the distribution of power within institutions. In a subsequent article, Brennan and Shah (2000, 15) argue that quality assessment, "at the subject or programme level can affect the status and influence of departments: a 'successful' assessment enhancing them, an 'unsuccessful' assessment damaging them. Quality assessment at the institutional level, by emphasizing the responsibilities exercised at that level, tends to strengthen institutional management." They also found that quality assessment

threatens the autonomy of institutions and the power of tenured academic staff (Clark 1983; Becher and Kogan, 1992 in Brennan and Shah 2000, 16). Given that these relationships exist, the focus shifts to interrogating who actually benefits from these quality arrangements. As Luckett (2006 in Kahsay 2012, 35-36; 2007, 99) questions, in analyses of any quality assurance system, one needs to ask whose interests are actually being served. Brennan and Shah (2000, 15) clarify further the underlying dynamics regardless when quality arrangements are internal or external in nature:

> "Ownership and control over quality assessment are often disputed because quality assessment affects the allocation of scarce resources—status as much as funding. It also has symbolic force, being seen as a challenge to academic autonomy whether at the individual, institutional or system level. National quality bodies have to strike some kind of balance between representation of the interests of institutional management, the academic profession more widely, non-academic interests and the agents of the state. The achieved balance may not have much effect on how the body carries out its job, but it will affect how various interest groups react to its work."

The concept of autonomy raised above may be one issue that is central yet seemingly under tackled in the debate on assessing higher education quality. Although some analysts have started to ponder this area in recent decades (e.g. Sachs 1994), it has largely escaped the scrutinizing gaze of researchers. The ivory tower, bearing in mind notions of academic freedom, still remains an untouchable realm that some observers suggest is in dire need of creative destruction (see, for instance, Backus 2013).

It is quite obvious that academia's "untouchability" derives largely from its influential position in society as a principal producer and diffuser of knowledge. Morley (2003, 106) observes that, "In the academy, processes of power are complicated by the autonomy and authority that accrue as a result of expert power. It can mean that those beyond the boundary of knowledge cannot question a professional judgment." What emerges from the discussion

above is this very intimate relationship between autonomy and power—a relationship that merits further examination as it relates to the aforementioned rise of external bodies in charge of academic assessments. In one study by Jacobs (1998) on the technikons in South Africa, as an example, one primary finding was that external quality assurance increased institutional autonomy but what is unclear is whether this increase in autonomy was, in fact, beneficial or not over time.

2.1.1 Institutional Autonomy and External Agency Independence

Bestowing more autonomy on an institution is not an objectionable act in and by itself. Hendel and Lewis (2005, 252) suggest that, "some level of autonomy from external public control of the institution should accompany the implementation and reform of both private and public higher education." What this tells us is that autonomy is also necessary to enable organizations and possibly push them further to deliver better services. On the downside, too much autonomy may also lead to complacency, internal corruption, and, consequently, overall deterioration in quality. The pertinent question, therefore, is how could arrangements be designed so as to achieve balance in terms of autonomy—that is, power that is given may also be tempered and checked. For Hénard and Mitterle (2010, 72-73), the design of these arrangements is an opportunity for institutions, intermediate bodies such as quality assurance agencies and funding authorities, and, finally, the state to collectively agree on levels of autonomy and to delineate areas of responsibility. As opposed to but also close to the improvement-accountability dichotomy, striking a balance between these two is another difficult task for actors involved that would necessitate the sharing of good practices across the sector. When done successfully, Hénard and Mitterle go on to say, this may then create a

shared vision of higher education policy that these stakeholders may converge towards. Indeed, Martin and Stella (2007, 104) note that in putting up a quality assurance system, the independence of the agency from not only the state but also from the academic community form as the most crucial concerns.

Another relationship that would also affect the design of quality management arrangements, especially on the national level, would be between the state and the external agency in charge of audits and institutional assessments. Hou et al. (2015, 104) find that when a government increasingly controls an agency's external reviews and internal governance, that this could threaten its independence and, subsequently, impinge on its credibility. Another study by Varghese and Martin (2016, 8), this time on Asian systems, find that in "state-dominated economies, the state still continued to exercise decision-making authority by reducing institutional autonomy. Countries with more bureaucratic management systems took longer to become accustomed to the new forms of governance and management structures. Overall, autonomy-based reforms proved easier to implement in countries with a strong tradition of collegial decision-making." Finally, Crosier and Parveva (2013, 44) find that systems that use a "light touch" in external quality assurance—that is agencies that only ensure measures are established within institutions and are not supervisory in character with the power to permit or refuse programs to operate—tend to interfere less in decision-making at the institutional level. Another study, in contrast, found that the direct regulatory role of the state was strengthened while the institutional autonomy of universities were significantly weakened (Capano 2014, 199). These recent studies point to the increasing interest of observers in issues of power as this is implicated in governance arrangements in the domain of higher education quality. However, traditional intellectual frameworks coming mostly from political science and sociology may not be well suited to examining the intricacies of power in such a

dynamic policy field such as higher education. Given that epistemic social science has largely focused on causation to underpin models—despite the diversity of contexts and reflexivity of human beings—makes the search for such prescriptions possibly futile and cosmetic. The search for a more reflexive and practical philosophy of the social sciences continues on. Yet, one recent innovation resulting from the *Perestroika* in political science may hold the key to more sensible and realistic analyses of human behavior and systems.

2.1.2 Power, Values, and Flyvbjerg's Phronesis

Since power, as embodied in the notion of autonomy, has been raised repeatedly in the foregoing discussion, the essential task of this study is to appropriately examine this within a context of policy change. One possible framework that may be appropriate to the task at hand is a contemporary interpretation of phronesis as formulated by Flyvbjerg (2001) that has instigated intense debates across the social sciences.

In his book *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg asks the fundamental question if whether "theory" is possible in the social sciences. The primary criticism that he puts forward is that the social sciences, broadly understood, has been largely ineffective since it aligns itself with the historical philosophical roots that the natural sciences draw from. Some have termed this "physics envy" and could be seen, for example, in the limitations of economics as a discipline, which has not resolved the element of reflexivity in the very creatures it seeks to examine and is still largely trapped under a rationalist paradigm that has severely limited its utility in dealing with real world problems despite many important contributions. Comparing the intellectual traditions that have been transmitted from Plato and Aristotle, over to Hegel and Kant, and up to the scholars of the present period, Flyvbjerg (2001, 55-60) considers a lost type of knowledge that may resolve the fundamental philosophical question earlier

posed. He begins with Aristotle, in differentiating between the concepts of episteme, techne, and phronesis and how these correspond to how they have been expressed in contemporary times. Episteme, he writes, is concerned with universals and knowledge that is invariable in time and space—a type of knowledge that mirrors perfectly the natural sciences and contemporary paradigms. To him, this would largely constitute the modern scientific ideal that predominates in academia with paying much attention to verifiability of causation and the standards of disciplines in terms of validity and reliability. Techne, meanwhile, is concrete, variable, and context-dependent activity that deals with the application of technical skills according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality. The arts, crafts, and other technologies, in this regard, would exemplify this kind of knowledge. Finally, phronesis, an ancient concept that has not established an equivalent in contemporary times, emphasizes practical ethics that "can never be equated with or reduced to knowledge of general truths." According to Flyvbjerg, the primary activity of phronesis is "deliberation about values with reference to praxis." In contrast with the universality of episteme, phronesis prioritizes the particular and requires consideration, judgment, and choice. As such, a phronetic social science, as laid out by Flyvbjerg (2001, 60, 130-131), is interested in analyzing power with the principal objective of delivering social commentary and social action. In addition to the three primary questions of classical phronetic research, which are: Where are we going? Is this desirable? What should be done?—He adds a fourth—Who gains and who loses; by which mechanisms of power? The phronetic researcher, for Flyvbjerg, therefore, is tasked with balancing instrumental rationality with value-rationality.

An important implication of the argument above, and one position that Flyvbjerg also espouses, is the very involvement of the researcher in the phenomenon that she is examining. Contrast this with the prevailing belief held by some scholars of the necessary detachment of

the researcher from her object of study. Finch (1986, 209), in examining the various roles of the policy researcher—namely as a provider of enlightenment, an adviser, an advocate on behalf of the research subjects, and as a *de facto* policymakers—would very well agree. She argues that, "policy-oriented research of a qualitative kind can realistically be carried out only on the understanding that the knowledge created cannot be 'objective' in the sense of being neutral in relation to the political processes of policy-making." This makes the phronetic approach, as it resolves some of the core problems in the philosophy of the social sciences, not only appropriate but also powerful in reframing how we understand and do social science. Nonetheless, even with this novel perspective on the philosophy of the social sciences and policy planning research, scholarly standards in terms of validation would still apply. The difference only is in the conceptual mindset through which data is gathered and analyzed in the production of knowledge.

Moreover, the use of a phronetic approach closely aligns with the earlier suggestion of Morley (2003, 105) to apply the theory of micropolitics in examining the "subterranean conflicts, competitions, and minutiae of social relations" and as such, this provides "an analytical corrective to traditional notions of disembodied objectivity and meritocracy." Utilizing a phronetic framework, it is argued, could render questions on objectivity and the political position of the researcher, as rooted in the distinction between facts and values, moot and a vestige of social science's epistemic roots. In addition, as Flyvbjerg mentions in his book, the phronetic approach concentrates too on the "little things" that could be more instructive in understanding social dynamics more deeply. Finally, this project directly responds to Jeliazkova and Westerheijden's (2002, 437) call for a more analytical and reflective look at "what is happening and what the potential benefits and problems could be for the various actors involved."

To conclude—the difference between a traditional case study and a phronetic one is, whereas a traditional case study would typically seek to produce generalizable theory, the phronetic approach would produce "exemplary knowledge" that is "given in context and understood (only) in that context" (Thomas 2011, 215). In sum, the phronetic approach does not claim nor does it attempt to comprehend causation that is invariable in time and space but attempts to deconstruct power so as to arrive at "informed" action that may only be "reasonable" in that specific situation and only at that given point in time. So while the conclusions that may be reached under this framework may be helpful in the Irish system, it may not be readily applicable in other national systems.

2.2 Data Gathering and Analysis

Since a full utilization of the phronetic framework would necessitate a long-term investigation by embedding one's self in the specific context over a significant period of time to properly grasp the intricacies of power at work, this research project would, as an exploratory project, only be concerned in identifying the actors and outlining their value-rationalities to generate tentative conceptualizations (or hypotheses in terms of epistemic social sciences) that would depict a sense of phronesis in the practice of quality management. Akin to the preliminary step of laying out the terms of a debate, the research attempted here only seeks to grasp the contours of the political arena in the regime of quality management and to identify possible points of contention that may be actionable in the Irish system.

While the bulk of empirical findings were drawn primarily from documents gathered from official websites and during a two-day fieldwork in Dublin, interviews were also used to verify pertinent points and to ask respondents probing questions. Findings from these two methods were then combined to get a grasp of the actors' "exemplary knowledge" and the

values that underpin quality processes. From a total of 16 interview requests, ranging from the central administration of the university, intermediary bodies such as Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), to student representatives involved in quality reviews, only four interviews were granted.[2] These were Dr. Roy Ferguson, the Director of Quality at University College Dublin (UCD); Dr. Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive of QQI and Irish Universities Quality Board; Mr. Jack Leahy, QQI Board Member and Union of Students in Ireland Vice President for Academic Affairs and Quality Assurance; And UCD Student Union President Marcus O'Halloran. The first two were particularly important as they were intimately involved in the quality review processes and saw firsthand the recent evolution of the Irish higher education sector. An interview protocol was prepared for this research project (see appendix) but not all of the questions were asked of each of the respondents. More specific questions were directly given following the general questions contained in the protocol serving as a guide. Just the same, in these interviews, despite being a handful, empirical saturation may have been achieved for the purposes and scope of this project since Dr. Ferguson, Dr. Walsh, and Mr. Jack Leahy were informative and candid in their answers. It is regrettable that, given the limited amount of time for this research project and the timing of interviews done during the beginning of the students' examination period in Ireland, that no faculty perspectives were gathered.[3]

In the next chapter, empirical findings are weaved together to create a narrative of change on the national level to situate the analysis in the succeeding chapter after, which will primarily

[2] Most requests directed at the central structure and the executive team members of units were referred to the unit quality office of UCD who granted access early on. It may be due to the fact that the UCD has the most extensive experience in quality reviews since it is also the largest constituent unit in the NUI. Although it may be a unlikely possibility, sensitivity to the recent political issues involved may have also deterred potential respondents.

[3] This was raised during the interview with Dr. Ferguson but he mentions that faculty members, in general, are not mostly involved in quality reviews. Be that as it may, collecting these perspectives could have given a better vantage point to more accurately interpreting prevailing value-rationalities.

contain the analysis of this study together with policy and practical implications on the institutional level.

3. Quality and Change in Irish Higher Education Policy

After reviewing the academic literature to situate this study and outlining the intellectual framework, this chapter shall contain the preliminary empirical details of the examined case based primarily on collected documents. The opening section shall discuss recent developments in higher education policy in Ireland on the national-level to lay the groundwork for the subsequent discussion on the institutional level. This chapter then proceeds to the latter section centered on the National University of Ireland (NUI) and how it relates to various stakeholders inside and outside the university in the management of quality.

3.1 Recent Developments in Irish Higher Education

Over 210,000 students and 22,500 staff, of which 60 percent are faculty, are part of the Irish public higher education system. These individuals are spread across seven universities, 14 Institutes of Technology, and 15 colleges (Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education 2015, iii). Of this count, 27,000 international students from 114 countries are also currently present in Ireland. According to the European Commission Study on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Public Spending on Tertiary Education, Irish universities have the highest graduation rate in Europe and are regarded as the most employable (Irish Universities Association 2015). High levels of public support, fueled by the economic boom during the turn of the 21st century, made Ireland fifth among the 32-member Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the percentage of the population with a university degree (The Irish and U.S. Higher Education Roundtable 2012, 4). Unfortunately, the enviable circumstances of the Irish higher education system portrayed here did not last.

The global financial crisis of 2008 would, subsequently, necessitate deep cuts in the generous funding for Ireland's higher education and research system (Hazelkorn 2014). Even in recent years, as it is, 74 percent of the estimated EUR 2.7 billion is sourced from the state (Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education 2015, iii). Alongside austerity measures, an increase of EUR 250 in student fees in 2014 coupled with a one percent cut in core pay were also previously declared to be unsustainable by the Irish Universities' Association (Humphreys 2014). NUI Maynooth President Philip Nolan has warned that further cuts could produce mediocrity in the system as may have already been reflected in the slide of Irish institutions on global league tables such as the Times Higher Education and QS University World Rankings in recent years. At the same time, a looming demographic boom likewise threatens to "overwhelm Irish universities already coping with budget cuts" (The Irish and U.S. Higher Education Roundtable 2012, 6, 13).

To confront these challenges and sustain progress, the Irish government formulated additional policies that sought to further transform the country's higher education sector. One such policy is the process of voluntary amalgamations and conversions of institutes of technology into "technological universities" that would create a "reconfigured binary higher education system" in the coming years (Hinfelaar 2012). As early as 2010, moreover, the government committed further investments to the tune of EUR 570 million in the areas of science, technology, and enterprise development that the Irish Innovation Taskforce states would "make Ireland the best place in Europe to turn research into jobs and to start and scale an innovative firm" (Hennigan 2010). Compared to these two previous actions, one of the most comprehensive policies so far would be the *National Strategy for Higher Education to*

2030 or more commonly known as the Hunt report. Walsh and Loxley (2015) describe this major piece of policy as the "latest and most assertive attempt by the Irish state to re-construct higher education in accordance with economic utilitarian objectives" that is in line with the dominant paradigm of making a knowledge-based economy. They argue, though, that this policy is not a novel undertaking but a mere synthesis of recent policies. In any case, the Hunt report declared that the reform of tertiary-level institutions is motivated by "the need to improve learning outcomes and provide high quality research" that shall be achieved through a "radical reform of third level institutions to maximise existing funding, in particular reform of academic contracts, and encourage greater specialisation by educational institutions" (Oireachtas Library & Research Service 2014, 11-12). As the extract below reveals, the quality of the student learning experience is vital in this transformation:

> "Higher education is central to the economic renewal we need to support individual well-being and social development. But it also plays a fundamental role in fostering a spirit of inquiry and a strong sense of the value of learning among students; it is the positive engagement that students have with higher education that stimulates the imagination and makes innovation possible. The quality of their learning experiences and the environment in which students learn will shape the future development of our society. The people who enter higher education in the coming decades are the job creators, policy-makers, social innovators and business leaders of the future. They are also citizens who will add to the richness of society – as parents, community leaders and teachers – and in their chosen area of work they will be the productive engine of a vibrant and prosperous economy." (Hunt, et al. 2011, 9)

Interestingly, around a decade later and just after the release of the Hunt report, the Irish national government would pass another major piece of legislation that would, undoubtedly, truly profoundly shape the higher education quality management regime in the country.

3.2 Quality Regimes and the National University of Ireland

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, passed by the Irish government in 2012, would later establish QQI, which effectively absorbed the former

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (Houses of the Oireachtas 2012). While this policy is generally in line with trends in the wider European higher education area, particularly in the creation of an external quality agency, it is important to track the recent evolution of quality management on the national level to give its background, as it relates to the institutional level, and detail the conflict it previously caused.

In the years before the global financial crisis, Irish universities were intimately involved in the design of a quality framework by which these organizations will be assessed. This was done through the Inter-University Quality Steering Committee whose collective approach was based on a "a holistic view of the university that involves all major stakeholders and external experts." According to the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (2003), some of the core aspects of the formulated framework included:

1. Principles based on quality as strategy, quality review as a driver of change, quality as analysis and reflection, and quality as a shared responsibility;
2. Offices primarily in charge with quality within institutions;
3. Student participation in quality reviews;
4. Participation of other stakeholders; and
5. The four major elements of the review process that included self-assessment, peer review and a peer review report, and the implementation of findings for continuing improvement.

The aspects enumerated above were, more or less, a reflection of the direction that the Universities Act of 1997 already previously advanced. That earlier piece of legislation mandated that each university's governing authority require its chief officer to establish quality assurance procedures at the institutional level and that these procedures should be performed at regular intervals or at least once every ten years in agreement with each department or unit. The law, to highlight, also specifically stipulated that reviews should include students. The act, in addition, asked too for a publication of findings and that these

should be implemented with regards to available resources. Compared with previous regulations, while the Hunt report continues an improvement orientation in quality reviews, it also states that the data on higher education outcomes be made publicly available (Hunt, et al. 2011, 11). Whereas the Universities Act of 1997 only asks for a publication, to point out, the latest policy was explicit on making these documents publicly accessible. Lastly, the Universities Act of 1997 may equally be considered a landmark law as it updates both the Irish Universities Act of 1908 and the charter of the NUI, specifically on replacing the earlier General Board of Studies with a Senate, which shall be constituted by, among others, persons elected by each of the constituent unit of NUI. Apart from the additional arrangements that the Universities Act of 1997 set in terms of quality management, the law was also responsible in transforming the relationships between the constituent parts of the university and effectively increased their autonomy.

A federated system previously composed of four colleges, namely the University College Dublin (UCD), University College Cork (UCC), NUI Galway, and Maynooth University/NUI Maynooth, the NUI was established in the beginning of the 20th century as a democratizing effort to provide wider access to higher education in the country. From being a single unified university that had multiple campuses, these constituent colleges then became autonomous self-governing universities under the Universities Act of 1997. The awarding of degrees, however, was still retained by the NUI (Manning 2010). Inopportunely, the NUI, as the biggest element of the Irish higher education system, would additionally face an existential threat from the global economic crisis.

Back in 2010, Ireland's top seven colleges were running deficits amounting to EUR 32 million with UCD and UCC with the highest sums at EUR 13 million each. The deal these

units struck with the Higher Education Authority, as part of a debt-cutting program, is to reduce staff costs by three percent per year. This program could be seen as part of a wider effort motivated by a move to a tertiary level sector that "promotes efficiencies and improved performance" (McConnell 2010). Ominously, in spite of that, the reduction in staff costs would not be the only piece on the proverbial chopping block.

As another impact again from the economic and fiscal crises on the Irish higher education landscape, it appears that the national government at that time was rationalizing the whole system to cut down on costs while trying to maintain the system's competitiveness. Leaving no stone unturned, part of the previous government's efforts was the dissolution of the NUI itself. This move came from a recommendation in a government report that the abolition of the federal structure, along with its functions, particularly the NUI Senate's appointment of external examiners in its institutional review processes, would yield savings of up to EUR 3 million per year. The NUI argued in opposition that savings would only amount to EUR 1 million a year since any new body that would replace it, for instance, would still have to compensate these external examiners. As a further matter but also a very important one, the original plan was for the 15 staff members belonging to the central administration of NUI to be absorbed into the new quality assurance body (Flynn 2010). This gives one the initial impression that the central administration of this university is somewhat involved in quality management processes. In any case, not surprisingly, NUI Chancellor Maurice Manning mounted a strong lobby against this proposal. In a written position, he gave the following reasons for the retention of the federated structure:

> "Through their collaborative activities NUI degrees are protected and promoted and the NUI brand is sustained. Without such a connective framework, the names of the individual institutions (each of which has National University of Ireland as part of its legal name) will in my view lose their meaning and damage will be

> done to the reputation of their degrees. For this reason, the NUI constituent universities all support the retention of NUI. … The continuation of NUI is not in any way at odds with the establishment of the proposed new super agency for qualifications and quality assurance. NUI will co-operate fully in any new framework for external quality assurance in universities." (Manning 2010)

NUI Galway President Professor Jim Browne echoed the same sentiment in that dissolving the federal structure could be a step backwards "in terms of ensuring greater co-operation and collaboration between the universities" (Walshe 2010). However in contention, both UCD President Dr. Hugh Brady and former UCC president Dr. Gerry Wrixon stated publicly that NUI was a hindrance in establishing strong external public identities or branding for their own units (Flynn 2010). Having stated that, Dr. Roy Ferguson however mentioned, in a way, the NUI name, as an umbrella brand, also helps with broader recognition, especially for attracting overseas students unfamiliar with Irish higher education. Whether this is really the case could be the subject of another study. Notwithstanding, Chancellor Manning eventually succeeded in retaining the federated structure and central administration. Part of Chancellor Manning's success may be attributed to the political power of elected NUI representatives in the Dáil Éireann, the lower house and principal chamber of the Irish legislature that Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive of QQI, both confirm.[4]

What emerges in the narrative above is a complex picture where political power, vested interests, and previous policies all intersect in the domain of quality management. In the succeeding chapter, after focusing on the wider context and change in Irish higher education and quality management, this study shall undertake a closer look at the internal quality processes, specifically focused on a single constituent unit, namely the UCD, with a

[4] Ireland's 1937 Constitution contains a provision where NUI graduates are given three seats in their legislative chamber. The same privilege is also given to graduates of the ancient and leading university in the country, Trinity College Dublin.

discussion using the analytical framework to arrive at possible policy implications in the dynamic domain of higher education.

4. Exploring Phronesis in a Federated University

From the system-wide level narrative that precedes this chapter, the analysis of this research largely focus on quality management on the institutional level by exploring the value-rationalities of the primary actors involved. Findings are utilized throughout in how phronesis could inform policy design and implementation in a still evolving regulatory regime in Ireland. While this part interlaces the external agency QQI with the central administration of a federated university, the discussion centers on UCD. The chief reason for this is, as mentioned in the previous chapter, quality assessments are largely focused on the unit level in the country.[5]

To restate—the novelty of this research, compared with other studies that analyze quality assessment in university departments (e.g. Stella 2002), is that the framework seeks to examine the case through a phronetic lens. As such, issues of power and values will be the focal points of this discussion to arrive at a tentative understanding of "exemplary knowledge"—not the determination of causation.

4.1 The Principle of Externality

Among the overarching principles that the QQI articulates as "common-factor" criteria (Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2013, 7), including the learning outcome and implementation principles,[6] the principle of externality may be one value that could be weakly utilized in actual practice and potentially a source for questioning the effective ness

[5] This focus, as Dr. Ferguson and Dr. Walsh, both confirm, was carried over from the Universities Act of 1997 up to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act of 2012.

[6] Other considered principles also include those coming from the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) Principles.

and legitimacy of reviews. This, therefore, forms as a possible primary point of contention under the analytical framework. In the document *Quality Assurance Guidelines and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards*, the Irish external agency defines this principle in the following way:

> "A provider-owned quality assurance system makes appropriate use of external persons who are independent of the provider and who are expertly qualified to make national and international comparisons." (Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2013, 7)

This principle of externality may be considered to be motivated by the belief that the use of external examiners would be able to capture full objectivity. Historically, the involvement of external examiners or individual academics who are invited to comment on an institution's standards is described by McGhee (2003, 123) as a "distinctively British arrangement" that, in this case, was likely brought to Ireland by its proximity to the United Kingdom and its colonial past. On one hand, McGhee mention that this system is designed to uphold standards across the sector or discipline. But on the other, he adds, the system has also been criticized with accusations of "cronyism, off-the-record assurances by departments that problems would be fixed, and rubber-stamping." In the NUI, the Universities Act of 1997 previously set down that the University Senate would approve external examiners in agreement with the departments. In an interview with Dr. Ferguson of UCD's quality office, he mentioned that the departments name these examiners and the NUI Senate only subsequently approves them. In fact, he describes the NUI's central administration's role in quality management as "marginal" at best, as the units interact directly with both the UCD quality office and QQI. In a way, the non-involvement of the federal level may be beneficial to the review process as a whole since bypassing another bureaucratic layer obviously contributes to administrative efficiency. Arguably though, there may also be a missed opportunity for deeper involvement

and to redefine a greater role for the central administration. The campaign mounted by Chancellor Manning to sustain the federated structure may be underutilized, or worse, could go to waste, if no concrete function may evolve from the defended "connective framework" that he mentioned.

A serious criticism, nevertheless, that may be put forward on the marginal role of the NUI in the quality process, i.e. its appointment of external examiners, is this probably amounts to rubber-stamping—one of the criticisms just cited—as it may be the case that the aspect of independence may be weakly implemented to only mean "not a member of the university itself." To illustrate concretely, unit members, specifically faculty, may be inclined to nominate peers who, although coming from another university, may largely view the department's practices and traditions more favorably than adversarial colleagues coming from the same discipline. If this were the case, then objectivity in reviews could be compromised, as conflict of interest may occur in this arrangement. As previously pointed out in a review by the European University Association (EUA) (2005, 82) on the institutional practice of quality in UCC:

> "The team would also like to stress the need to remove any link between the Department under review and the choice of peer reviewers. This is necessary in order to maintain the independence and objectivity of the review process. The small size of many Departments likewise requires that peers be nominated by others, since such a Department's own pool of potential reviewers may in some cases be limited."

The interview with Dr. Ferguson revealed, however, that the practice is still retained by units across the federated system. This finding substantiates the role of autonomy in how units may keep control over processes of quality reviews despite strong recommendations given by external bodies. In spite of this, a stronger implementation of the notion of "independence" perhaps could be to include methods that could look more deeply at the social ties between

units and external examiners. Although this may necessitate more resources to investigate relationships and add more to the workload of the central administration or external agency, it could also possibly prevent chances of cronyism. On top of that, adversarial criticisms may even help the unit better as it could make use of more candid and honest assessments that would contribute to its improvement further. Be that as it may, the most feasible option could be for either the central administration or an external agency to name the external examiner, as the EUA previously recommended (2005, 82). Although the power of the unit or department is slightly reduced in these processes, in this way, the idea of independence as discussed above would be strengthened.

In any case, the tentative phronesis or exemplary judgment that may be gathered from the practice of quality management in NUI, based on examined documents and a few key interviews, would be that a colleague coming from the same discipline would be in the best position to judge quality since standards and disciplinary traditions have already been inculcated through academic training. To use a hypothetical situation to further illuminate this "exemplary knowledge"—it would not make much sense to appoint an external examiner, for instance, from the field of sociology to assess quality of a chemistry department. The sociologist will not have the capability nor the appreciation to properly evaluate laboratories, the variety of chemical reagents, and other learning apparatuses that facilitate and enhance the training of chemists. A recent study by Bloxham et al. (2015), however, found that the potential of experienced peers in quality assurance is limited as consistency in standards is found to be lacking. In response, it is suggested that the development of shared meaning may contribute to addressing this problem. Relatedly, the UNESCO (2010, 38) has also warned of the influence of personal subjectivity on professional judgments and recommended a rigorous training strategy to ensure reliability.

Just the same—keeping in mind the context wherein this phronesis may be validly applied—such pragmatism or exemplary judgment would ultimately depend on the present levels of professionalism, pervasiveness of inbreeding, and scale of higher education systems in specific country contexts. As Morley (2003, 111-112) notes, "Peer review and external examining is based largely on social capital, that is social networks and horizontal communications. Hence it is open to inclusions and exclusions that can reinforce or challenge academic power relations. … Hence peer review appears benign and collegial, but is underpinned with a set of values and hegemonies that are highly problematic." It should be added that it is not only social capital but also cultural capital—the ultimate source of reputation—that underpin these processes and should be further examined and deconstructed.

To conclude, one key implication for policymakers and administrators of education providers would be a refocus on understanding and interpreting disciplinal cultures, scholarly networks, and stakeholder communities to strengthen the principle of externality, and consequently, objectivity in the Irish higher education context. Additionally, a more granular approach, such as employing social network analyses to further assess the validity of external reviews, may possibly lead to more innovative arrangements in quality management. Although it is not implied here in any way that the autonomy of units will be limited by such actions—which would also be difficult to implement since powers and functions already given are close to impossible to be taken back—there is a foreseen need for truly independent checks on these powers. One way to accomplishing this is further refinement in the methods used by either the central administration or the external agency. It is possibly through this that a new meaning of autonomy may emerge or further clarified in that it is not absolute nor does it mean complete absence of outside interference.

On balance, the strength of the Irish quality model would rest on its predominant improvement orientation on the unit level. This, arguably, counters the possible deficiencies that increased autonomy may bring forth and is in line with Kastelliz's findings (2014, 26) in many countries that are increasingly moving towards more enhancement-led procedures. In addition, as pointed out by Dr. Ferguson, one aspect that makes the Irish system unique is its legislated requirement to make reviews publicly accessible. In a way, the public gaze reinforces the element of accountability, which, accompanied also by published action plans of units, work in tandem with the notion of improvement. Indeed, the concern for the maintenance and improvement of quality in higher education has created a demand to make these processes more explicit (Blackstock et al. 2010, 42), particularly to and for stakeholders in the wider public sphere. This answers directly Perellon's question (2007, 161) of how the collected information is actually used as a reflection of the power relationships among stakeholders who contend on how quality assurance should be organized.[7]

Consistent with the wider literature, the findings here support the view that a focus on the unit, as practiced in the Irish model, tends to concentrate efforts into improvement. As remarked by Bender and Siller (2006 in Harvey and Williams 2010b, 84), "a programme is better able to ensure the ownership, development and integrity of and research into its own curriculum if it has a centralised university improvement system that presents unit-level quality management research to external market and accountability groups." So if the external and internal approaches to quality assurance could work well together and attending to both institutional and program levels while having a focus on the disciplinary unit as the primary site of action and arena of contention is possible, the pertinent question then shifts to

[7] Ewell (2010, 175), however, notes that there is a lack of knowledge whether public disclosure actually improves student learning experiences. In addition, Harvey (2002 in Kis 2005, 15) mentions that, "at worse, 'two sets of books' may be prepared"—one for internal use and another as an "embellished" external version.

whether the interlocutors of the "owners" of the quality review and improvement processes could meaningfully engage other stakeholders in a quality management system. In the concluding chapter this shall be considered through looking at the involvement of students in quality reviews, among other aspects, towards thinking about possible directions this research points towards.

5. Conclusion and Further Study

Through an investigation of the case of NUI under a phronetic lens, this research examined the management of quality in a federated university that operates in a dynamic environment of declining state financial support in tandem with increased global competition to deliver higher performance. These pressures lead to the policy goal of constructing a coherent and functional quality system that, analysts note, is still currently evolving as a regulatory domain. The primary tentative finding here of an "exemplary knowledge" that places value on the expert assessments of disciplinal peers—which may be conceptualized as cultural capital that serves as the roots of reputation and, accordingly, the legitimacy of reviews—may actually be compromised by the social capital shared with those being assessed. One key implication, as stated, is to increase attention on methods utilized on the institutional level that could strengthen the validity, reliability, and independence of these practices. While having a unit focus that blends both accountability and improvement has been shown to work well together in the case of Irish higher education, there are still some persistent issues such as enhancing the principle of externality in practice.

As an exploratory study, one underlying purpose of this project is also to point to possible directions for further research. In the previous chapter, it was raised that looking at stakeholder participation in quality reviews, specifically student involvement, could be one area worth examining. Apart from the stage of development and the level of international participation, the European Commission also finds that the Irish quality assurance processes have progressed significantly on the criterion of student participation (Hunt, et al. 2011, 42). Such a study may contribute to understanding more the impact of quality reviews on the student learning experience, which, to stress, is at the core of education itself. Ewell (2010,

174) has already noted that, in the United States, there are moves towards going beyond "inspection of assessment as a process to examining actual levels of student performance." Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) also argue, in their proposal of a holistic model of quality management that "address the service, education and implementation aspects synergistically," that embodying the "learning communities" concept may enhance quality. Indeed, as Crosier and Parveva (2013, 46) note, student services, as part of a holistic view of quality, has been the most commonly neglected issue and that participation in processes needs much improvement. Harvey and Newton (2004, 159) concur with arguing that,

> "If quality evaluation is to be transformed in the direction of enhancement of the student experience, and conditions created for bringing about sustained change and improvement in universities, then it is necessary to fully understand what is involved in both 'quality evaluation' and 'quality enhancement', and to develop far more sophisticated understandings of how higher education institutions work."

Presently, as revealed in interviews with UCD Student Union President Marcus O'Halloran and QQI board member and also Union of Students in Ireland (USI) Vice President for Academic Affairs & Quality Assurance Jack Leahy, there are initiatives already underway to better prepare students and recent graduates to more meaningfully participate in quality reviews. It would be very interesting to find out how these initiatives would affect these processes and whether they would actually work in improving student learning experiences in the coming years.

Another direction worth examining would be institutional change in other archetypal organizational configurations such as specialized or small-scale institutions such as liberal arts or community colleges that relate to external agencies. For example, an international study, the "Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance Processes of Higher Education Institutions. Pluralistic Methodology and Application of a Formative Transdisciplinary

Impact Evaluation" (IMPALA), which seeks to overcome rudimentary impact analyses of external quality procedures on organizational structures (Bejan et al. 2015, 344) points to increasing interest in this line of inquiry.[8] As this study attempted, attending to how shifting policies also change configurations of power on the institutional level may produce new meanings of autonomy and quality in higher education.

Finally, policy analysts and researchers are invited to further examine organic developments of quality management that relate to an institution's branding and strategic direction. Various authors (Kastelliz 2014, 28; Mhlanga 2008, ii; Stensaker and Leiber 2015, 332) recently argue that the collegial dimension in higher education organization may be strengthened by external quality assurance when the institution's unique characteristics and identity are considered. Harvey and Newton (2004 in Kis 2005, 30) also conclude that "empirical evidence show that the most effective quality improvement seems to occur when external quality arrangements mesh with internal processes." The overall finding in this research follows closely Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker's argument (2010, 39) for quality management systems to be "decentralised"—that is focused on disciplinary characteristics and having different quality standards. These findings, including those from this research done under a phronetic framework, point to the direction where the organic development of quality management systems responds directly to the peculiarities of institutions as opposed to a one-size-fits-all model on the institutional level, and leans more towards making internal processes the primary considerations when constructing the external aspect of a quality management system on the national level.

[8] In terms of specific instruments employed, Tight (2003, 109) identifies four linked areas of research: course evaluation, grading and outcomes, national monitoring practices, and system standards. Kettunen (2012) also finds that a "process-based quality assurance system makes the organisation responsive, agile and enables the achievement of strategic objectives." Lastly, as an indication of an internal focus, Harvey (2006, 288) reports on the establishment of quality assurance units inside institutions apart from the quality-related mission statements, strategies, and policies many have already put in place.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Institution: _____
Interviewee
(Title and Name): _____

Introduction

Thank you for granting an interview.

You have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the administrative practice of quality in a constituent unit of the National University of Ireland.

My research project focuses on the development of internal and external quality management systems in NUI. My study does not aim to evaluate your assessment techniques, rather, I am trying to learn more about the practice of quality assessment in a federal or collegiate university.

To facilitate data gathering, I would like to record our conversation today. For your information, only me and members of the MAPP thesis committee will be privy to these recordings which will be eventually transcribed. Please let me know if you would prefer anonymity in the writing of this study's results.

I have planned this interview to last for 40 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been in your present position?

Probe: How about at NUI/Organization?

What is your field of study?

1. Briefly describe your role as it relates to quality management (if appropriate).

Probe: How did you get involved?

B. Institutional Perspective
1. How is quality defined in your institution?

Probe: Who is involved in defining quality?

2. What is the strategy at NUI for improving institutional quality? OR SPECIFIC

Probe: Is it working – why or why not?

Probe: In your view, how does the quality strategy of NUI differ as compared with other Irish universities? OR How do quality strategies differ between the constituent units of NUI?

Probe: If strategies and methods differ per constituent unit, how do these relate to the unit's mission, context, and clientele?

Probe: How would you describe the internal quality culture in the university, if any?

3. What has been the role of the central administration of NUI in shaping quality management practices?

Probe: How autonomous are the constituent units in the management of quality?

4. What has been the impact of the arrival of QQI in 2012 in the Irish higher education landscape?

Probe: How has NUI or UCD changed in response to new quality arrangements?

5. How have influences from the regional/European level (e.g. ENQA) shaped the practice of quality on the institutional level in NUI?

Probe: How about on the constituent unit and programme levels?

6. How do NUI and its constituent units fit in the broader higher education framework of Ireland?

Probe: How would you put the institutional identity of NUI into words?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations

Other Topics Discussed:

Documents Obtained:

Post Interview Comments or Leads: