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The Ideological Reconstruction of Higher Education

Problematism Quality Assurance in
the European Higher Education Area

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Abstract

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Title:	The Ideological Reconstruction of Higher Education: Problematising Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.
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Summary:	<p>The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ideological forces working in the sphere of quality assurance in higher education. Through discourse analysis on two seminal policy documents, the <i>European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area</i> (ENQA 2005) and <i>OECD Work on Education</i> (OECD 2010), the ideologically underbuilt discourses of Europe and Cost-effectiveness are identified. These work together to maintain a wider discourse of quality assurance that is conveyed through demands for accountability, assessment and a systems' level mentality.</p> <p>The discourses within quality assurance in higher education are ideologically grounded in neo-liberal values, creating a shift in the long-term purpose of higher education into the delivery of measurable outcomes and employable students. This study suggests that further research, as well as policy-making, within the field needs to consider the ideological basis for these discourses and the hegemony of Neo-liberalism they support. Critical voices need to question our views on the purpose of higher education and the implications these have for the future.</p>
Keywords:	Quality, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, EHEA, OECD, ENQA, Discourse analysis, Ideology

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Introduction

Higher education in Europe has undergone major changes during the last decades. The Bologna Process has brought new ways of thinking about and working with everything from curriculum and grading scales, to assuring quality against European-level standards at our higher education institutions (O'Dowd 2010; Harvey & Williams 2010). In times of economical strain, governments want value for money from their public institutions, increasing the demands on accountability (Harvey 2005; Hjort & Sundkvist 2010). These processes, it is argued, drain the academic society of trust as well as time and effort that could have been put into actual practices of education and research. At the same time, researchers are not sure if the systems of quality assurance have brought around any improvements that would not have happened regardless of these systems (Newton 2000; Ewell 2010).

What are the implications for higher education in this era of assuring quality? The reasons for conducting this study were manifold, but the principle reason was weariness of policy-making in higher education without any grounds in education research. Many reforms during the past years in Sweden have proven to be insufficient, or even counterproductive. Examples are introducing tuition fees for non-European students, changes in the admission procedures and grading scales, and the latest national system for quality assurance. The government had to change some of them more or less immediately when it turned out they did not work as planned. What does this indicate about decision-making in higher education, if not that it needs some investigation?

Quality assurance is a global machinery, working simultaneously on all levels of higher education – from the individual academic who has to actually provide the systems with information (and hopefully at the same time enhance quality on their own courses), to transnational organisations such as OECD and the building of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Quality assurance as a European phenomenon is interesting since it has developed from the initiative of European Ministers of Education. It has then been realised through the works of organisations such as ENQA, EURASHE, EUA and ESU. But what is the purpose of these rigorous systems? Do we need quality assurance, and all that it entails, in order to improve higher education for the students? And in that case, what do we count as improvement? The implementation of systems for assuring quality and demanding accountability from higher education institutions has implications for how we view the purpose of education at large.

There are many actors in the field of European-level policy-making in higher education. The jurisdiction for each of these actors is not very clear, leaving the democratic procedures in an ambiguous position. Do citizens set the agenda, or is it set by organisations with certain interests such as OECD and ENQA? There are some parallel evaluation processes going on right now regarding the parts of the QA machinery. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) is undergoing an external review, and the various use that institutions and student unions make of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ENQA 2005) is being mapped, as it is the basis for the register and of reviews being conducted by quality assurance agencies across EHEA.

What forces are at work, shaping higher education right now? And what ideological grounds do they stand on? From where does the demand for developing these rigorous systems of quality assurance come? I will attempt to shed some light on these issues in this study. In order to do so, I will look into the language use in policy documents within a field that is largely governed by policies. What has not been discussed much in this field, however, are the underlying ideologies they carry.

Key Concepts and Abbreviations

In the field of quality assurance, there are many abbreviations that are used in general by most actors. I have chosen to use some of them in order for the text to run more smoothly.

Quality Assurance (QA): This concept refers to the whole sphere of systems for quality assurance, reviews by quality assurance agencies and the co-operation on many levels (institutional, local, national, European and sometimes even global) for conducting this. Quality assurance, or QA, has become the short name for working with developing higher education on a systems' level.

Quality assurance agency: QA agencies are organisations conducting peer reviews and audits on higher education institutions. Some are competitive organisations, while others, like in Sweden, are publicly run by the state.

Higher Education Institutions (HEI:s): The commonly used noun to include universities, polytechnics and other institutions where higher education is conducted.

EUA: European University Association

EURASHE: The European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESU: The European Students' Union

The E4-group: A forum where representatives from the four organisations EUA, EURASHE, ENQA and ESU come together to work on policies and strategies for European higher education.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA): A concept used to describe and include the regions that are complying with the Bologna Process. Mostly used when talking about student mobility and QA.

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

AHELO: an OECD project for the International assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes.

Background

In this background chapter I will provide a context for this study. Central concepts as the Bologna Process and quality assurance, as well as previous work that has been done within the field, are presented, especially as it focuses on discourse.

The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process, initiated by European Ministers of Education in 1999, meant a whole new way of co-operating between institutions of higher education in countries around Europe. The guiding concepts of student mobility, transparency and compliance to an education system of three levels¹ were pointing towards a future where students could travel the continent and be sure to get high quality education with transferable credits. However, for many academics this was the beginning of an increased administrative burden (O'Dowd 2010; Harvey & Williams 2010).

Introducing Quality Assurance

The concept of quality, and quality assurance, in higher education has had an impact on, as well as input from, countries world wide (Harvey & Williams 2010). Harvey and Williams point out in their summarising article *15 years of Quality in Higher Education* the variety of contributions to the journal from all over the world. In their analysis they stress that both purpose and context are necessary to keep in focus when analysing quality, especially when trying to define the concept itself. Quality is about more than just stakeholders' satisfaction with higher education; it has political implications as well (ibid.). Meanwhile, quality assurance systems do tend to look more or less the same around the globe, due to the common North West European and United States origin of these systems, with rigorous systems for accreditation:

The proliferation of quality assurance agencies is being followed by a mushrooming of qualifications frameworks and the growing pressure to accredit everything, even though that is a poor means of assuring quality and encouraging improvement. (Harvey and Williams 2010, p.24)

Kushimoto (2009) argues that since policies and systems on outcomes assessment (like AHELO²) are often implemented for accountability reasons, this makes it harder for involved actors to work towards, and even make visible, the enhancements that could follow from these policies and systems:

[...] outcomes assessment initially motivated by external demands do not necessarily play an active role in self-review, and consequently, do not lead to the progress of undergraduate education. (Kushimoto 2009, p.597)

Although Kushimoto (2009) is critical towards policies initiated by external factors, the trend is pointing towards more demands on accountability. Instead of giving up outcomes assessment, he claims that institutions of higher education should work to find better ways of using these kinds of elements in enhancing the quality of education. This conflict between accountability and enhancement is also pointed out by Harvey and

1 Bachelor, Master, and Ph.D.

2 AHELO is an OECD project for the International assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes

Williams (2010). External reviews tend to focus more on accountability than enhancement, and many articles have been written on how to balance these two sides of quality assurance. Harvey and Williams (ibid.) claim that reciprocity and trust are necessary for review panels in order to make improvement possible at the same time as accountability is clear, and that trust is one key element that is lacking in many places within QA in higher education. They found that quality audits seem to encourage improvement to a larger extent, although there seems to be a tension between how academics perceive their profession and the bureaucracy of an audit, in addition to the view that lack of trust is a reason for the audit in the first place (ibid.). Regarding accreditation, the debate took off in the journal *Quality in Higher Education* around 2001, a decade after the journal's release. Haakstad (in Harvey & Williams 2010) here argued that programme accreditations were not specifically fit for purpose and that accreditation should be done on an institutional level, a note that he claims has been more or less ignored by politicians in the higher education sector.

Rather, there has been a significant amount of work done by amateurs at the beginning of QA, according to Woodhouse (in Harvey & Williams 2010). The creating of an international network for mutual advice and support in 1991 helped turning this around, as quality assurance agencies started to pay attention to the quality of their own work. They started to discuss what makes a good QA agency, an issue that according to Woodhouse (Ibid.) came timely as the increasingly globalised world demanded that agencies invest confidence in each other's judgements and interact worldwide.

Discourse Analysis and Ideology

Discourse analysis in the field of quality assurance in higher education has been conducted before. Filippakou (2011) takes a look at the concept of 'quality' in the UK context, focusing on the building of common sense through ideology. She argues that ideology creates a monolithic understanding of quality, that limits the way we work with and understand higher education in our society. Seeing ideology as having a specific impact and effect on discourses, Filippakou claims that there are five characteristics showing when ideology is present: partiality, unequal distribution of power, social struggles, naturalness and loss of voice.

In 1992, when analysing the idea of quality in higher education, Ronald Barnett argued that '[t]he debate over quality in higher education should be seen for what it is: a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in the attempt to impose definitions of higher education' (Filippakou 2011, p.17)

Filippakou (2011) argues that the debate on quality in higher education has been dominated by a discourse of control, to the extent that it has become common sense to talk about quality in terms of accountability, assessment and audits. This shows a discourse, affected by ideology, that is more closed than open in its definitions. The seemingly natural notion of control in the discourse of quality leads to a state where it is not questioned (ibid.). In this sense, some discourses on quality that are backed by powerful organisations can enjoy the benefits of being dominant, and sometimes even naturalised:

According to Kress (1990), the form in which texts for quality assurance are produced – institutional rather than personal publications, reflecting consultation and written in the language of a 'commonsense' objectivity – conveys an aura of authority. (Filippakou 2011, p.25)

Students' employability is one case where we see higher education's adaptation to the market economy as a necessity rather than an ideologically influenced opinion. Filip-

pakou (2011) goes on and identifies two major discourses on quality, namely 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement', determining and shaping each other mutually. These are more or less corresponding to Harvey and William's (2010) notion on the tension between accountability and enhancement as mentioned earlier.

For instance, in texts produced by the QAA³ in the UK, students' employability is a major concern, a concern that comes from a certain ideology; of ways of thinking about the relationship between higher education and the economy, of utility in relation to education, demonstrating some would argue the dominance of a neo-liberal ideology (Filippakou 2011, p.19)

Not only powerful organisations are a threat to the discursive openness. Filippakou (2011) points to repetition as a potential creator of common sense and thus an obstacle to question the ideology. One example is of an academic, explaining in an interview, that there has always been an instance for controlling the institutions, and there probably always will be. Filippakou (2011) asks the question whether national policies on quality in higher education is simply a tool for state control or if it is indeed an educational issue. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the impact of national agendas when looking at the activities at higher education institutions since they are governed to varying extent by national policy.

Conducting a discourse analysis in the context of New Labour and education politics in the UK, Mulderrig (2003) emphasises the importance of conducting investigations on the rhetoric and language use within social policy-making. She identifies the creation of a discourse within UK education politics that incorporates market economical logics and competitiveness – what she calls a "Neo Liberalism with a Discourse of Social justice" (ibid.). This discourse has opened up education to a new set of values determining principles, methods, purpose, management and funding. This was all motivated by the increasing globalisation and all its challenges, and Mulderrig (ibid.) claims it was also a response to explicit calls from powerful organisations such as OECD and others for rapid reform in order to meet these challenges. However, she points out that this explanation is too simplistic, and misleading:

However, to call education policy solely a response seems to endorse the government's own legitimacy rhetoric, which constructs globalization as an inexorable force of change to which nations and individuals must be prepared to adapt [...]. The power of the rhetoric of globalization lies precisely in its self-representation as an abstract challenge to be met, rather than the agent-driven processes of capitalist development. Policies are represented as simply meeting the challenges of a contemporary world, thus serving general interests, rather than as contributing to capitalism's ongoing globalised construction and thus in fact serving particular interests. (Mulderrig 2003; no page number)

Rather than a response to the globalised economic system, Mulderrig (2003) argues that the change in education politics and policy-making is itself part of constructing and legitimising globalisation and how we should respond to it.

Quality Assurance and the Implications for Education

Many researchers arrive at the conclusion that the immense work with quality assurance systems have made impact on the forms of work, but that the quality of education (teaching and learning) has not changed much (Newton 2000; Kushimoto 2009; Ewell 2010). In other words, the institutions of higher education, as especially documented in the UK (Newton 2000), have become very good at filling out forms and presenting their

3 The quality assurance agency

quality assurance systems to external reviewers. One thing that Ewell (2010) points out as a potential positive consequence from all this quality assurance, is the spotlight directed towards teaching, as opposed to the ever so prevailing searchlight on research. However:

The elephant in the room remains the fact that we don't really know how all of this has affected how much or how well students learn. Twenty years of continually evolving quality review, however, has at least given us a vocabulary to begin to talk about this most important question. And that too is a form of progress. (Ewell 2010, p.175)

Nevertheless, Harvey (2005) points out that the quality assurance systems have failed to enhance transformative learning and teaching. He claims that the accountability pressure and political pragmatism takes away the trust that is needed for transformative learning and improving education. This, although studies in the UK have arrived at the conclusion that the best way to support quality enhancement in higher education is to let the academy itself become a place of critical discussion, as opposed to external reviews (ibid.). The lack of trust between government and institutions of higher education seems to manifest itself as requirements of standards control and assessment of student's achievements, with funding on the line of fire (ibid.). The issue of trust is reoccurring in the debate of quality assurance with its focus on accountability and assessment. Power (1999) claims that a society that invests in rigorous systems for accountability through audit processes is not necessarily a society without trust. Rather, he argues, trust is invested in cycles – for each level of activity or audit you can choose to invest trust, or to create the next cycle of trust by appointing someone to audit the activity, or to audit the auditors themselves.

Paradoxically, the external reviews focus on the internal systems for quality assurance, instead of investigating the 'actual' quality of teaching and students' achievements (Harvey, 2005). Again, Harvey criticises the authorities for prioritising clear, "allocation of money-friendly" methods of quality assurance rather than first establishing the purpose of the reviews and choose method accordingly (ibid, p.267). He comments on the change in quality assurance systems in the UK during the middle 1990's, and points out that despite initial resistance from the old universities, and the fact that the system was designed to fit them, the younger polytechnics⁴ seemed better prepared. In the end, however, it was the old universities who got the best results from the evaluations. Harvey (ibid.) claims that the system had a built-in view of high quality education as correlating to high quality research:

Despite the exclusion of the research profile from the criteria of teaching quality there was a surprisingly high correlation of research and teaching quality in the early rounds. To suggest good researchers were also good teachers is naive and suggests that evaluations followed reputation and, probably, traditional modes of teaching. (Harvey 2005, p.268)

Finally, Harvey (2005) points out that there seems to be a general slide towards institutionalising the word *quality* into depicting all kinds of quality assurance procedures within higher education:

The term "quality" is used far more frequently, in practice, as shorthand for the bureaucratic procedures than to refer to the concept of quality itself. (Harvey 2005, p.272)

⁴ Polytechnics were not regarded equal to universities as higher education institutions in the UK before this reform.

Purpose

My contribution to the field of pedagogy aims at shedding some light on the social construction of higher education and quality assurance. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ideological forces working in the sphere of quality assurance in higher education. The questions I investigate are:

1. How can the overall purpose of quality assurance at the European level as stated by two central actors be understood?
2. What are the ideological underpinnings upheld by these two actors?
3. What is perceived to be the future of higher education in Europe and beyond as expressed by the two actors and their promotion of quality assurance?

Using discourse analysis, I will present my interpretation of two seminal texts that play a central role in how quality assurance in higher education in Europe is to be understood and implemented. Investigating the above questions necessitates an awareness that the field of quality assurance itself is characterised by ideology, power and rigorous systems for maintaining and reinforcing the discourse of quality assurance.

Method

For this thesis, I have analysed selected texts on quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), more specifically mission statements and major strategies for organisations that deal with higher education on the European level. To make sense of the different views on the purpose of quality assurance I set out to conduct a discourse analysis. While looking at the field, the many stakeholders and decision-makers in the sphere of higher education all seemed to have their interpretations and agendas, something that pointed towards a struggle between different actors' interpretations, or as I will approach the matter; a struggle between different discourses for hegemony (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2008).

Identifying Research Data

When deciding on which documents to analyse, I set up a few criteria. First of all, I wanted official documents from some of the more influential organisations in the sphere of European higher education. Secondly, I wanted documents that were easily accessible since they are more probable to be read by a larger audience and thus potentially have more influence. From these, I singled out the strategic documents concerning Quality Assurance from each organisation, choosing newer documents over old ones. All in all, five policy texts were retrieved from the official websites of EURASHE (European Association of Higher Education Institutions), ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), EUA (European University Association), ESU (European Students' Union) and OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). From these, I then selected two for my closer analysis.

Using only official documents from these organisations would, however, provide me with just one side of the issue at hand. These organisations all work together to spread and refine quality assurance in higher education. In order to incorporate a more critical view for my final discussions, I turned to articles in scientific journals for theoretical frameworks and inspiration. When finding articles, I used the following keywords combined in various ways: quality, higher education, education, quality assurance, assessment, ideology, discourse, discourse analysis.

Introducing Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis, as presented by Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (2008), is not one single theory or method, but rather a genre that covers a range of different interpretations and practices. There are, however, some basic assumptions that are common to the various branches, and those are first of all that discourse analysis builds on a social constructivist perspective (ibid.). Jørgensen and Phillips list general features of social constructivism, including a *critical approach* to taken-for-granted knowledge, as well as historical and social specificity meaning that our understanding of the world is *contingent* – that is, it could just as well be different, and it can change over time and context. Thus, our understanding of the world is social, and different voices compete over what should be considered true or false. Ultimately, this also means that actions viewed as natural or true are dependent on the *social construction of knowledge* (ibid.).

My analysis will be based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, as interpreted and presented by Jørgensen and Phillips (2008). However, this means that I will not stay completely true to all facets and limitations of Laclau and Mouffe's theory. Rather, I try to incorporate the strengths of other theories on discourse in a similar way as Jørgensen and Phillips do, using parts of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse theory as well as influences from discourse psychology (*ibid.*).

In discourse theory, the foundation of knowledge is that the world is constituted in various ways when people talk, write and argue (Potter 2005). This means, that there is no "out there-truth", but rather that our interpretations of the world ascribe it meaning. A discourse can be said to be a sphere where certain concepts are ascribed a certain meaning. Jørgensen and Phillips (2008) present a simplistic definition for a discourse that is useful at an initial stage; "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world or an aspect of the world" (p.1). Discourses are, in other words, dependent on (and formed by) how people ascribe meaning to the world – but of equal importance is the influence discourses have on our further interpretations of the world. Language is the means by which we do this (*ibid.*).

Two of the central concepts of this discourse analysis are nodal points and elements (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008). A discourse can, again, be roughly described as a context, in which some signs are common and central to the understanding of the discourse – those are nodal points. These signs have a strong influence on the understanding of the context. As an example, I initially identified higher education institution as a nodal point in the discourse of quality assurance in higher education. It is crucial that we have higher education institutions in order to talk about quality assurance in higher education, and it is important that we have a common understanding of what is meant by the concept. However, some signs might be frequently used despite a vague understanding (or contradictory understandings) of them. These are called elements, and are described by Jørgensen and Phillips (*ibid.*) as concepts that are still in negotiation regarding their meaning. This negotiation can take place where one discourse meets another. One example is student participation, possibly meaning one thing for students and another for a quality assurance agency. The struggle could, but this is not always the case, end with one interpretation gaining influence over the other, and thus creating a "common sense" – a hegemony, as introduced by Gramsci and used within discourse theories in Jørgensen and Phillips (*ibid.*, p.16). This common sense, or hegemony, is never fixed, and can be challenged at any time. However, one cannot simply change the discursive meaning of an element due to the condition of power. Not everybody has the same freedom or power to challenge the discourse, as noted by various feminist researchers as well as discourse analysts (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008; see also Harding 1998).

Introducing Ideology

Ideology is a central concept in this thesis. One of many definitions of ideology can be found in Filippakou (2011). She claims that ideology is characterised by a partiality and presence of power differences, where the individual's understanding of the world is regulated. Ideology is present where a discourse becomes predictable in the sense that there is only one way of understanding the concepts within that discourse (*ibid.*). The discourse is closed, either through narrowness or minimised interaction:

Closed discourses do not allow space for variation; they are narrow and resistant to anything new or different. Thus in closed discourses there are a limited number of readings of reality. (Filippakou 2011, p.22)

On that note, my definition of ideology is a force, working to rule the interpretations and decisions of people within a discourse in a certain direction. Through ideological impact on the discourses within a sphere, common sense is strengthened and discussions tend to draw in one certain direction. The discourses are, in a way, synchronized to hold up a stronger hegemony of common sense.

Approaching the Field of Quality Assurance

To get a sense of the field of quality assurance within higher education on a European level, and to get an overview on the discussion so far, I started out reading articles and books discussing the field. After some time, I realised there was an almost never-ending supply of texts, and that many of the ones I read used more or less the same words and arrived at very similar conclusions (see for example Ewell 2010; Harvey & Williams 2010). This made me curious regarding the rhetorical foundations of this field and how the language is used to convey similar ideas over and over again. It was clear that an analysis on the language use would provide me with some answers regarding the blur of purpose for quality assurance. Discourse analysis provided me with a framework for looking at and interpreting the discussions in the field of quality assurance in higher education. However, it would not allow me to stand beside the discourse as an objective observer, able to see what is *really* meant. As a researcher, I am giving my interpretation in a way that is as transparent as possible, but never objectively *true* (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008). To illustrate, Allen (2000) uses the concept of *doxa*, where the reader is passive and only takes in what has been written:

The doxa suggests, and indeed embodies, the idea that stable meaning is possible, that a signified can be found for the text's signifiers, that language can uncomplicatedly represent the world, that a truth can finally be delivered by an author to a reader. (Allen 2000, p.79)

Like any reader, I am far from passive in my investigation of the texts in this study. All I can do is try to justify my conclusions in a way that gives the reader a possibility to follow my train of thought and keep a critical eye on my claims. One way to start is to declare my position in this field (ibid.).

My Position as a Contributor to the Discourse

I have personal experience from working directly and indirectly with strategies for higher education and quality assurance on a local as well as a European level within the frames of the student unions and their umbrella organisations. I have been a member of my institution's quality assurance board⁵ as a student representative, and I have also worked in a number of other bodies concerned with education and QA at the department-, faculty- and institutional level. Thus my experience of higher education policy making and quality assurance has been governed by the motives of the student unions, but also formed by the reality of financing, (very) local politics and limits due to Swedish legislation. My experience as a student representative can be seen as an advantage in that the students often are seen as outsiders ("stakeholders") in the process, meaning I could use this perspective to be able to be critical towards taken-for-granted

⁵ A direct translation would be "the development council". Here, issues regarding education and quality assurance are addressed.

knowledge within the field (Jørgensen & Phillips 2008). A clear disadvantage, however, is that the work of a student union representative is unmistakably political. This means that in order to be truly critical and open to new impressions, I have to let go of the political agenda of the students and allow myself to see things that can be unfavourable to student unions and put my own efforts within these organisations up for investigation. Student organisations have been applauding the rise of quality assurance for several reasons, and to step out of that political standpoint is not done overnight.

Being currently a student representative and an active perceiver and contributor of the developments in quality assurance in higher education, this thesis is naturally during writing subjected to new aspects and taken-for-granted values. I have for example while working on this thesis been active in decision-making bodies at my institution, workshops arranged by the European Students' Union (ESU), and a conference hosted by the Swedish Agency for Higher Education, to name some activities. In addition, I have previous experiences of similar events. This means, of course, that I am biased. But it also means I have an advantage in finding significant documents and concepts since I know my way around the field.

As an education major, I have thought (and read) a lot about the purposes of higher education and the role of higher education institutions. My conviction is that higher education should be characterised by curiosity, critical thinking and courage to endeavour on investigations that might prove to be dead ends, or provide fantastic insights. I claim that education has a value in itself, regardless of the measurability of students' accomplishments. The role of higher education institutions is not to provide society with employable graduates, but rather to educate students in order for them to see opportunities and analyse their surroundings more generally, as well as inspiring personal growth.

Critique on Choice of Method

Discourse analysis is a method that is very sensitive to influence from the researcher in question. Not only as the researcher has influence over what questions are asked and what areas are interesting, but also on a meta level; the “instructions” on how to go about a discourse analysis are multiple and varying in focus and basic comprehension of the world, of language and of human thinking and interaction. Moreover, when the researcher finally chooses a perspective within the field of discourse analysis, she or he has to perceive oneself as an actor in the discourse of discourse analysis. Where does it end? Although there are plenty of reasons against pursuing a discourse analysis, there are, of course, benefits that I find prevailing, such as the possibility of a close-up analysis of the texts that form the very core of European quality assurance of today. Moreover, Potter (2005) stresses that reality is dependent on our perception – we constitute our realities through the use of categories and descriptions. Taking that into consideration, I would argue that the problematic position of the researcher is not unique to discourse analysis, but rather made visible and put forward as a seminal factor in shaping the results of research. On this notion, Potter (ibid.) claims that discourse analysis is particularly suited for studies of fact construction – a concept that I find relevant for this study.

Fairclough (1993) claims critical discourse analysis to be one important method in the much wider context of mapping trends in higher education as a social practice. I agree that the investigation of language use in a sector where texts are the most central element, both within academia as such but also within the sphere of higher education management and systems, makes sense. This is one reason as to why I set out to conduct a

discourse analysis on policy documents. Mulderrig (2003) also claims that discourse analysis on social policy can enrich our understanding of the struggle between hegemonomies. Within higher education, policy documents tend to have a wide range of readers and they are used as reference within and between institutions. Policy documents are seminal and influence the use of language, phrases and even concepts in action plans, the work done in compliance with action plans, and in the reports documenting the results of these action plans and policies.

Analysis

In the following I will present my findings and give examples of citations as illustrations from the selected material. Firstly, I go through the mission statements for each organisation, and then I move on to other official documentation. The mission statements exist to provide a quick way of getting to know the organisations, and here we use them to get an overview of the actors on the scene of higher education policy making at a European level. In some cases the organisations had no 'mission statement' as such, but rather an introduction, or 'about us' text that resembled the mission statements of the others to the point that I could use them correspondingly.

Mission Statements

The mission statements from OECD, EUA, EURASHE and ENQA are quite similar and approximately say the same things i.e. they work towards a European Higher Education Area where they promote various stakeholders' views and try to gain influence over policies being made. There are, however, small differences in their choice of wording. OECD uses 'hard' words, like *objectivity*, *hard facts*, and *measure*. The tone OECD uses creates the impression of a team of objective scientists, taking every measure possible to make the correct prediction of tomorrow's society:

We analyse and compare data to predict future trends. We set international standards on all sorts of things, from the safety of chemicals and nuclear power plants to the quality of cucumbers. (OECD Mission Statement, retrieved on March 9th, 2011)

EUA, on the other hand, uses 'soft' words like *support*, *understand*, *building* and *enhancing*:

Equally, EUA looks to support its members in understanding and responding to these developments in an ever-more complex and competitive global environment. (EUA Mission Statement, retrieved on March 3rd, 2011)

Although EURASHE is more or less the equivalent to EUA, their mission statement has a very different tone in comparison. While having basically the same overall mission, to represent their member organisations, they tend to use more defensive words like *defend*, *ensure* and *safeguard*. In the introductory text, however, they use the word *promote*, but it is lost in the next sentence in favour of *defend*:

The mission of the association is to promote the interests of professional higher education in the member countries of the European Union and in other European countries [...]. EURASHE's main objective is, therefore, to defend the interests of the professionally oriented HEIs, and to continuously enhance the importance and the quality of professional higher education in Europe. (EURASHE Introduction retrieved on March 3rd, 2011)

The mission statement of ENQA is characterised by the choice of humble words such as *diversity*, *harmony*, *respect* and *autonomy*. Since ENQA does not represent institutions of higher education, but rather quality assurance agencies, this seems like a strategic way to practice influence, while not posing as a threat to other stakeholders and receiving bad will:

ENQA considers the autonomy of institutions and independence of quality assurance agencies within national HE systems as a necessary condition to ensure the full exercise of their re-

sponsibilities, notably with regard to the provision of accurate and consistent information to the general public. (ENQA Mission Statement, retrieved on March 3rd, 2011)

In contrast to the above mentioned organisations, ESU has a different focus as their text puts more weight on their member organisations and their characteristics, while at the same time taking no stand in relation to the creation of a European Higher Education Area. The tone is more "neutral":

The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. (What is ESU, retrieved on March 14th 2011)

Furthermore, the ESU states that they provide support and training for their student members as well as producing reports on the developments in the world of European higher education. Like the ENQA text, the ESU text focuses on representation of their members, using words like *support* and *promote*.

So What?

The different organisations seem to have a similar view on the basic topic of co-operation. All of them exist in order to contribute to a community of feedback, communication and understanding between different stakeholders in the sphere of higher education. However, the tone of their mission statements show some diversity and there is room to question if the different organisations' view on themselves and others correspond well to one another. One could argue that if the organisation presents itself as a stakeholder or as a decision-making part, this could potentially have implications for their way of work and interaction with the others. For example, EURASHE is representing polytechnics, institutions for higher education that in most countries have a lower status than the old universities. In that light, it is in my interpretation not far-fetched to assume that EURASHE perceives itself more as stakeholder, which explains the defensive wording in their mission statement. ENQA, on the other hand, know that they have a lot of influence and thus need to portray itself as a very humble organisation in order to get acceptance from the other organisations. ENQA is an organisation for agencies and thus they need to gain trust and recognition from the other organisations in order to maintain influence.

Policy Documents

In this study, policy documents have been selected on the basis of accessibility (and thus dissemination range) and, of course, with respect to the limitations of the thesis. I started out choosing one policy document from each organisation, corresponding to the subject of quality assurance in higher education. Of course, most of the organisations under study are exclusively concerned with topics within the higher education area, and in those cases I selected overall policy documents clearly addressing quality assurance as such. Thus, there are several policies concerning other areas of higher education that all add up to the quality of education and the student experience that are not subject to my analysis.

From the five documents read, I extracted two that I find more influential than the rest, that at the same time represent very different types of organisations and aims, namely the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education*

Area (ESG), published by ENQA in 2005 but prepared by the E4-group⁶ as a whole. The other report is *OECD Work on Education 2010-2011*. The differences between the two documents are vast; one is an introduction to the overall work on education done by OECD. The other is a set of standards and guidelines pointing out how quality assurance should be framed within the EHEA. First, I will take a close look at each document alone, and then intertwine them in my further discussions.

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

The front page of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (referred to below as the ESG) depicts Greek ornamented pillars holding up a building under a blue sky. The purpose of the picture is, in my interpretation, clearly to bring an old, solid and trustworthy university to mind. The document itself strives to speak to (and for) all institutions of higher education in Europe, and although there has been a deliberate use of the term *higher education institution* instead of *university*, not to exclude anyone, the picture still is caught in the discourse of the old genuine Greek university. This picture introduces a document that is speaking to the whole sphere of European higher education and laying out the course for years to come.

The most distinguishable parts of the ESG are basically lists of bullet points explaining how to pursue internal and external quality assurance, as well as reviewing quality assurance agencies, but these seemingly practical parts carry just as much politics and agendas as any statement of purpose (see, for example, Filippakou 2011). Within the document, however, there are parts where the purpose of quality assurance is discussed, as well as the political purpose of the document itself (ENQA 2005, pp.6, 10-15). I have decided to investigate the foreword and the executive summary more closely in this study (pages 5-11). This because I had to limit the study in some way, and the executive summary is the overview that sets the stage for the rest of the document – the rest is a more elaborate repetition, if you may say so. This means, however, that I have only studied the *standards*, since the *guidelines* are only in the later chapters. There is an ongoing discussion in the sphere of QA whether or not the guidelines are actually read since there seems to be a tendency towards using the standards as a check list.

The Author(ity)

Although the foreword is signed by the President of ENQA, the writer of the ESG is not a person, rather a network of organisations, each adding their weight to the document to make it influential (ENQA 2005, p.5). In theory, all European institutions for higher education, all students and all quality assurance agencies stand behind this document providing one strong voice on how to design quality assurance. This has implications for both the reader's expectations, and on the text itself, since it is clearly a document developed through political processes where the organisations, all with somewhat different interests, needed to agree on every final formulation. Since the concept of quality is here defined by so many actors within the field, it is not far-fetched to assume that the document is striving towards the presentation of a common understanding (aspiring on common sense) regarding quality assurance (Filippakou 2011).

6 ENQA, EURASHE, EUA and ESU.

The Reader

Who is the reader, then? The report itself states that it is directed at the European Ministers of Education, but that it is also meant to be an inspiration and a tool for those with an interest in quality assurance in higher education (ENQA 2005, p.5). Indeed, the ESG report has spread through European higher education fora over the past years, and institutions all over the continent (and even in other parts of the world) are working towards compliance (Harvey & Williams 2010).

The messages of the text are manifold, implicit as well as explicit in a couple of places, one example being in the first chapter *Context, Aims and Principles*⁷. Commenting on the mission delegated to them from the Ministers of Education, ENQA is implying that this document should have a major role to play within the field of quality assurance:

ENQA welcomed this opportunity to make a major contribution to the development of the European dimension in quality assurance and, thereby, to further the aims of the Bologna Process. (ENQA 2005, p10)

This presents the reader with the implicit instruction to pay close attention, since this document clearly is of great importance. Some other purposes of the text are maybe more straightforward and obvious: to provide European higher education with a set of common standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ENQA 2005, p5; p.6; p.10).

Finding Keywords

Initially, I created a frequency table that provided a first clue to which words can be regarded as keywords. In this, I mapped the occurrence of words I had perceived as frequently used in the sphere of quality assurance in higher education, especially within the ESG when I first read it. Then, in a second table, I mapped the occurrence of words that were not as obvious, and also words that I found reoccurring in scientific articles but not in my first reading. Basically, the second mapping was based on a more critical mind set, where words that I realised I had missed during the first mapping were investigated. Below are two tables presenting the most significant words that I found in these two mappings. Note that the words are not divided into grammatical varieties, so that for example *agency* and *agencies* are scored as the same word as well as *co-operation*, *co-operate* and *co-operative*.

First mapping	Frequency
Quality assurance	50
Agency	28
HEI/Institutions/institutional	16
European	12
Higher education	7
EHEA	5
ENQA	4
Quality	4
Co-operation	3
Enhancement	3
Accreditaion	2
Network	2
Accountability	2
Autonomy	1
Respect	1
Culture	1
University	0

⁷ This chapter is, however, not subject to my deeper analysis in the following discussion.

As we can see, there are some words that are more frequently used. Some of these were expected, such as *quality assurance* and *higher education institution (HEI)*, whereas some had a more unexpected quantity, such as *agencies*. The words that had an unexpected low frequency were *autonomy*, *accountability*, *respect* and *culture*, unexpected since the discussions around QA often draws on these concepts, both from my experiences and from articles on the matter (see for example Kushimoto 2009). Although *quality assurance* was expected to occur many times, *quality enhancement*, which surely one would expect to be the purpose of the commitment, only occurs three times in this part of the document. The first time *enhancement* is used is in the sentence "The credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies will be enhanced." (ENQA 2005, p.6). This points to a very specific problem within quality assurance, pointed out by several researchers: that the systems to ensure quality leads to a system compliance, rather than real educational change (Newton 2000; Kushimoto 2009; Ewell 2010). The two other occurrences are quite similar to the first one in respect to what exactly is to be enhanced, although they look completely different at first glance:

The exchange of viewpoints and experiences amongst agencies and other key stakeholders (including higher education institutions, students and labour market representatives) will be enhanced through the work of the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. (ENQA 2005, p.6)

They [HEI:s] should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. (ENQA 2005, p.7)

Both sentences actually maintain that the enhancement should be done within the quality assurance system itself, and not directed towards concrete teaching or research. The exchange of viewpoints concerning quality assurance, and the enhancement of quality (unspecified, but from the previous sentence we see that the reference is to quality in the sense of QA) are not referring to something outside the QA system, but something within. Quality in this discourse has become equal to (systems for) quality assurance.

Agencies are apparently very important in this document, as the word occurs 28 times within these 6 pages (ENQA 2005, pp.5-11). They actually outnumber *higher education institutions*, making my point as to where the spotlight is directed in the sphere of QA in higher education. Agencies do not conduct teaching. They are merely a tool for making sure that institutions follow the set of rules for QA that have been set up in this document by both agencies, institutions and students. Enhancing the work of agencies does not automatically lead to improvement in the quality of education as we have seen before (see, for example, Ewell 2010), although I have to point out that it is likely that it has a positive effect on the feedback given by agencies to higher education institutions and thus on the measures taken after an evaluation.

Finally, I would like to point to the occurrence of the word *European* (12 times), and *EHEA* (5 times) in this part of the ESG (ENQA 2005, pp.5-11). There is no doubt that the document is one part of a bigger process aiming to build a common view of Europe as *one* area of higher education, although maintaining that it is still diverse on some level. One way of establishing the European Higher Education Area is, of course, to use the term as if it was already established. The reader's mind is led towards a "common sense" recognition of the concept, despite that it is only recently starting to take form across Europe in the sense that it is conveyed in the ESG.

It must be emphasised that the report is no more than a first step [...] to the establishment of a widely shared set of underpinning values, expectations and good practice in relation to quality and its assurance, by institutions and agencies across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). (ENQA 2005, p.5)

This is also the only place in the studied parts of the text that the deliberate implementation of *values* are mentioned, as a purpose for the document identified by the authors already in the foreword. There is no explicit discussion around the ESG's value-bound aspects in the text, although the creation of a quality culture is mentioned once.

Searching for Missing Words

This table presents the frequency of words that I wanted to have a look at after my first mapping. They are either words that I found during my first search, or words that I found 'missing' in the text:

Second mapping	Frequency
Standards	13
Review	12
Recognition	4
Responsibility/responsible	3
Assessment	1
Expectations	1
Values	1
Trust	1
Expect/expected	1
Regulations	0
Consequence	0

The frequent use of *standards* might not be very surprising, since it is used within every reference to the document itself as well as in the subtitles. However, it is still interesting for this discourse analysis if you take into consideration the non-occurrence of *regulations*, a word that could easily have been used instead. *Standards* imply that the rules in question are rather an ideal, something to strive for, and not a regulation forced upon the sector without necessarily an intrinsic value. What is not mentioned, is constructive feedback on learning and teaching (or, in other words, elements outside the QA system itself) as well as consequences in the case of non-compliance. What happens if an institution for higher education simply chooses not to comply with these standards? Should every stakeholder work towards compliance, or are the standards only successful for certain groups of interest? I will return to these questions in my later discussion.

Review is a very frequently used word that, not unlike *agencies*, shows the reader what part of QA is of great importance to the authors. The ESG is a document with the foremost purpose of guiding agencies and higher education institutions through reviews on their QA work.

It forms the response to the twin mandates given to ENQA [...] to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' and 'to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies'. (ENQA 2005, p.6)

Words that are not used in the context of review are *monitoring*, *surveillance* or a discussion on the issue of *trust*, although trust is mentioned once as an expected outcome from the implementation of the standards; "The mutual trust among institutions and agencies will grow." (ENQA 2005, p.6). In the following chapters I will discuss the im-

plications of trust and review further. *Recognition* is, however, used in the document, perhaps as a substitute for *trust*. Recognition implies trust – you have to trust that the other parties are working towards compliance in order to recognise them as suitable partners. However, this recognition is only within the quality assurance system itself – as long as your system is in place, you can expect to be recognised by others who have adapted to the same system. The consequences for standing outside are not explicitly formulated, but one can easily deduct how a single institution would get by outside the system if it is not recognised by the academic society. The issue at hand is of course: recognition by whom?

A European register for quality assurance agencies will be produced. A European Register Committee will act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register. (ENQA 2005, p.6)

Can we then assume that a register-approved agency that approves an institution's system for quality assurance is the same as a recognised institution? The implicit message is that as long as you have a system in place for assuring quality, the quality of the institution as a whole will meet international standards and the institution will be recognised by other institutions, stakeholders and society. Hence, trust will arise due to the accredited agency's accreditation of an institution. One question that remains to be answered is where to end the line by investing actual trust – is a QA register committee trustworthy, and for how long? When will there be standards for how to audit the committee? The use of the word *gatekeeper* illustrates the discourse's boundaries – you have to pass the gatekeeper to get in, and in order to do this, you need a certain vocabulary, a certain system and a certain way of talking about it. After having entered the system through the gatekeeper, it remains unclear as to whom one invests trust. The gatekeepers themselves? The system? Or the norms and values that underlie the system?

The Jump into the Future

What can we tell from the mapping? The frequency with which words are used, does not reveal the deeper meaning of what they convey. In discourse analysis, Saussure (in Jørgensen & Phillips 2008) claims that it is vital to differentiate between a sign's form (significant) and its content (signifié). I have in the initial part above put the words in a context, but the further investigation interpreting their content is still ahead.

In order to highlight the intrinsic values and objectives of the text, I identified a section where a jump takes place – this is where the text teleports from point A to point B without any detailed declaration of how it got there. In this specific part, there is a silent assumption that the recommendations of the ESG report automatically will lead to a change in the quality assurance practices in Europe (ENQA 2005, p.6):

The main results and recommendations of the report are:

- There will be European standards for internal and external quality assurance, and for external quality assurance agencies.
- European quality assurance agencies will be expected to submit themselves to a cyclical review within five years.
- There will be an emphasis on subsidiarity, with reviews being undertaken nationally where possible.
- A European register of quality assurance agencies will be produced.
- A European Register Committee will act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register.

- A European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education will be established.

When the recommendations are implemented:

- The consistency of quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will be improved by the use of agreed standards and guidelines.
- Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies across the EHEA will be able to use common reference points for quality assurance.
- The register will make it easier to identify professional and credible agencies.
- Procedures for the recognition of qualifications will be strengthened.
- The credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies will be enhanced.
- The exchange of viewpoints and experiences amongst agencies and other key stakeholders (including higher education institutions, students and labour market representatives) will be enhanced through the work of the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
- The mutual trust among institutions and agencies will grow.
- The move toward mutual recognition will be assisted. (Ibid.)

This part presents the overall purpose of the ESG document – these are the characteristics of the future if compliance is realised. It is significant how the word *will* is used, instead of a more humble or proposing *would/could/should*. The recommendations are rather written as directions, or prophecies even. Adding to this is, of course, the notion of results *when* the recommendations are implemented – not *if*. The reason why I interpret this as a crucial point in the text is the gap between the implementation of certain systems and procedures in the first part, and the transformation into results such as increased trust and credibility already in the next part. This gap is very important. By not filling it in, the writers create a common sense around the outcomes of the ESG. In a way, a black box is created – rules for procedures go in, and trust and recognition come out.

Where is Everybody?

Another characteristic in this part of the text is the absence of people. The only actors are organisations such as agencies and institutions. The only mentioning of people is in one of the last bullet points, displaying students and labour market representatives. The organisations are given human abilities, such as the ability to trust, recognise and act in different ways. By not mentioning human beings, but rather putting focus on the bureaucratic entities, a sense of objectivity and common sense is gained. It is not people who are acting to accomplish these changes in QA, rather, change is *being done* by agencies, a register committee and higher education institutions. The passive verbs are also a part in taking away the persons behind this change. Is it in order to eliminate the perception of that things are actually changing? If I pick apples every year, the subject (I) is visible, accountable and sensitive to input from other actors. If apples are picked every year, there is no subject to influence or hold accountable for the activity. The absence of humans creates a feeling of unambiguity – rather than being contingent, actions are presented as common sense consequences that could not have happened in any other way.

The removal of the Author has not so much made room for a revision of the concept of authorship as it has, through a variety of rhetorical moves, repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity in favor of the (new) monolith of anonymous textuality, or, in Foucault's phrase, 'transcendental anonymity'. (Miller, cited in Allen, 2000 p.155)

Let's turn to these invisible people working with quality assurance in higher education. As we saw during the mapping, there is an ambiguity as to where trust actually is invested after entering the gates of quality assurance. People working in order for their institution or agency to comply with the standards, have already invested trust in the idea of quality assurance and its advantages in order to get past the gatekeeper. Once on the inside, they become co-producers of the social construction that is QA in higher education. By entering as co-producer, their space to be critical or to even question the construction must be significantly decreased. A need to stay loyal to the system arises, and even if you do not believe that it is solely advantageous, it is hard to disregard the threats of standing outside. Thus, you stay on the inside and become a pulling force for those who are still on the outside. In other words, by recognising the threats posed to you by the gatekeeper, you automatically subscribe to the construction of the quality assurance discourse as a whole and the norms and values underlying it. Again, the gap between A and B is contingent but expressed as common sense.

The further implications of the keywords found during the mapping will be discussed by highlighting the discourses that they work within, with help from other theorists within the field in the chapter *the Workings and Purposes of the Discourses*. I will now turn to the OECD document and investigate it closely as I did with the ESG.

OECD Work on Education

From OECD's document, I have looked closely at the introductory chapters *Education at the OECD* (OECD 2010, p.1) and *What does the OECD do?* (p.2-3), as well as the chapter on *Higher Education* (p.8). The character of this document is very different from the ESG. The most striking difference is the amount of colourful pictures, almost all with people in them. At first glance, it looks like an easy-to-read-document, and it is probably meant to be accessible to people outside the sector of education. The reader of this document is not stated by the authors, as it was in the ESG, and the introductory pages contain a basic description of the organisation as a whole, and the role of education in today's globalised society. A very important aspect is that the document is concerned with education in the wider sense of the word – higher education is only one chapter among eight. The surrounding chapters are: Early Childhood Education and Care, Schooling, Transitions Beyond Initial Education, Adult Learning, Equity and Equality of Opportunity, and finally Innovation and Knowledge Management. These chapters have not been closely investigated in this study.

The Authors

The OECD Directorate for Education is the official author of this document. The staff is portrayed together as a group on the second page, and some of them are also in individual pictures at the very end of the document, with a description of their responsibilities. This gives the document a quite friendly and personal voice. Also, in the introductory pages both the OECD Secretary-General and the Director for Education each present a short text on their thoughts on education in today's changing world. Many of the pages have an orange rectangle at the bottom, with information such as:

DID YOU KNOW... There are 20 different nationalities among the staff working in the OECD Directorate for Education almost equally split between men and women. (OECD 2010, p.i).

Although this adds to the document's accessibility, the question immediately arises as to what education or professional profiles these people in the picture possess. Are there any educators, or are they all economists? I perceive that this document is to be read by member states, non-members, and citizens of varying ages. The language in the texts is, however, still on a level that requires attentive reading and some previous knowledge about globalisation, education and economy.

Finding Keywords

Trying to approach the two documents in a similar way, I once again started out by making a frequency table over key words. After reading the selected parts of the document, I decided on a set of words that I wanted to map, both from the impression I got from reading the document, and corresponding to the purpose of this thesis. Again, the words are not grammatically differentiated – *economy* includes for example *economic*, *economies*, etc.

First mapping	Frequency
Education	45
Economy	23
Quality	6
Outcome	5
Europe	5
Assessment	4
World	3
Student/Learner	3
Quality Assurance	1

As expected, the words *economy* and *education* occur frequently in this text. But the language all in all is quite varied, and does not show an over-representation of certain words to the same extent as the ESG did. This difference is logical due to the fact that the OECD document is not a policy document in the same sense, rather a statement of the organisation's political agenda within the field of education. Does this document stand outside the inner circle of the quality assurance in higher education-discourse that was identified in the ESG, or is it using the same discourse only slightly differently? All I could know after my first mapping was, that this document would be harder to work with in terms of finding obvious keywords. I went back to the text a second time, and searched for the following words:

Second mapping	Frequency
Policy	12
Development	10
Future	7
Learning	5
Access	3
Best/Good practice	3
Effective	3
Commitment	2
Efficient	2
Cost-effectiveness	1
Value for money	1

Although it is not a policy document in itself, we can see that the document is very much concerned with policy making. In fact, this is the first sentence answering the question of "What we do" (OECD 2010):

We provide comparative data and analysis on education policy-making to help build efficient and effective educational systems and improve learning outcomes. (OECD 2010, p.1)

The focus is clearly on the level of educational systems, and the organisation is striving to support their members in making wise decisions on education from the data and statistics provided by OECD. The question is, of course, what statistics they provide. One famous example brought up in the text is the annual PISA-report (Programme for International Student Assessment), but they also conduct education policy reviews. A recently started project, The Feasibility Study for the International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) is mentioned, as a way of focusing the outcomes of higher education in providing analysis and statistics (OECD 2010, p.8).

The Outcomes of Education

Also from other parts of the text, you get the impression that the organisation concentrates on the results of education; *outcome* and *assessment* are reoccurring words. Here, the question is of course how to gather information on education outcomes, and what is counted as a (relevant) outcome and not a side effect. However, it appears from their chapter devoted to higher education specifically, that the important outcomes of education are the ones measurable in the local (and global) economy:

Better management and delivery of tertiary education help countries achieve their economic and social objectives. We explore the factors underlying high quality teaching and learning, and offer advice on system objectives, quality assurance, financing and policies, and mechanisms to ensure effective governance. (OECD 2010, p.8)

This is also evident in the organisation's own definition of the most important issue in the sphere of education. The financial focus is present again, although there is also a focus on welfare and/or competitiveness, depending on how you look at it:

We help [our members] to answer the most important questions in education policy: how to best allocate resources in education to support social and economic development, and how to offer everyone the chance to make the most of their innate abilities at every stage of life. (OECD 2010, p.1)

The aim of the organisation as a whole is presented in the document, stating an explicit political agenda where economical factors are in focus. It is important to remember that this is to be expected from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – this organisation has an entirely different aim than, for example, the organisations in the E4-group that are behind the ESG.

The OECD brings together countries committed to democracy and the market economy from around the world to:

- support sustainable economic growth
- boost employment

- raise living standards
- maintain financial stability
- assist member and non-member countries' economic development
- contribute to growth in world trade (OECD 2010, p.2)

However, not mentioning the intrinsic value of education for the individual and society neither in the main organisational goals nor in the more specific statements on education implies a view on education as a *means* to achieve another end, in this case economic growth, employability and financial stability.

The Directorate for Education is part of the OECD Secretariat and contributes to the organisation's commitment to building a stronger, cleaner and fairer world economy. (OECD 2010, p.1)

It could be argued, however, that to view education as a means rather than an end in itself is not necessarily wrong. Within groups of students, teachers and policy-makers there are a variety of perceptions on this issue, and none can be said to be of greater value than the rest, notwithstanding that different views can have different value in certain contexts and for certain purposes. However, it should be stressed that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the assumption that education promotes development as specified in the terms OECD states (see, for example, Åsberg 1973). So what is the context of this text? The Secretary-General gives us a confirmation of the economic focus of the organisation:

Education is an investment in the future. Our work on education aims to make that investment strong, effective and fair. (Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General in OECD 2010, p.3)

All in all, there is strong focus on *development* and the *future*, two words that are used frequently throughout the document. This sets the document in the context of being visionary and fits statements as the ones we have seen above into the discourse of a brighter future where education is prioritised, highly valued, and cost-effective.

The Jump into Ideology

So, what are the significant outcomes of this document mapping? As stated before, it is important to enter a discussion to differentiate between a keyword sign's form and its content (Saussure in Jørgensen & Phillips 2008). From the context provided above, we now move into the interpretation of the content within the words.

As with the ESG, I here identified a section where a jump takes place without displaying the means of travelling. In the OECD text, there is a turning point where the Secretary-General moves from the declaration that education provides well-being, to the expressing of education's importance for raising awareness of competitiveness and pursuing opportunities:

Education is a critical part of any response [to the financial crisis and a globalised world]. Knowledge increases both wealth and well-being; university graduates in most countries earn more. Our research shows that people who complete upper secondary education are much more likely to report good health than those who do not. Yet education systems need to do a much better job in providing equitable educational opportunities - starting in early childhood, and continuing throughout life. They need to equip people with knowledge, skills and tools to stay competitive and engaged. (OECD 2010, p.3)

In this part of the text, the verbs are active and there are actual persons (university graduates and people) described as the actors. The gap between these paragraphs are

not, as in the ESG, a gap in time (if – so). It is rather an ideological shift, where the writer goes from well-being and good health to competitiveness and engagement. In the first part, we have a focus on societal and individual gains that are intrinsic within education. In the second part, the focus is on providing each individual with the means to pursue their own competitive career. Again, the reader is first presented with values that are easy to agree with, only to be led over the common sense-bridge uniting these two units and thus introducing another element radically changing the meaning of the first element.

Maintaining the Discourse through Common Sense Values

The explicit quest to support countries committed to "democracy and the market economy" (OECD 2010, p.2) is not supported by setting up gatekeepers and demanding accreditation for those who want to be on the inside. Rather, it is the effectiveness of common sense-creation on the basis of generally applicable values (it is no coincidence that *democracy* is put next to *the market economy*) and "universal" buzzwords working to include as many people as possible. In other words; it's easy to join and the organisation is associated with sympathetic values. Adding to this is the use of pictures of people in the document. Although we are not presented with the professional backgrounds of the co-workers at OECD, we can assume that they all share the values of the organisation and that is their common ground – the reason to be included in the group. They share a view on education as a means to create economic development and social welfare. However, there is a sound lack of evidence as to the results in creating social justice and economic development through education (Åsberg 1973; Heyneman 2003).

Nevertheless, the implication of a shared set of values creates a social and implicit border between insiders and outsiders. Although there is no gatekeeper, there is still a line you have to cross to become a member the group. The implicit message is: if you are not with us, you are against us – and that means that you are against democracy, development and social justice. This, of course, is going to cost you. One way of showing that you are on the right side of the line is to comply with the market economy's colonisation of education. This is done by the introduction of keywords like employability, cost-effectiveness and accountability in policies, plans and talk concerning higher education.

Summary

To summarise, we can note that both documents have organisations as their authors, although both have set aside space for the President and Secretary-General as well as the Director for Education respectively. The ESG leans more towards a de-humanised bureaucratic text, endorsed by organisations, in order to display unambiguity, while the OECD text tries to pose as a document written and endorsed by people, to convey a personal and friendly atmosphere. The target audience for the ESG is correspondingly organisations (higher education institutions, etc.), while politicians and public opinion are the target for OECD.

The differences in character of the two texts led to a variety in the identification of keywords, as seen in the frequency tables. However, it was possible to reveal some similarities as well as differences from this mapping. So far, some significant words have been identified as nodal points: Quality assurance, Higher education institution, Agency, European, Review, Economy, Policy. I have also discussed the "missing"

words that in the name of contingency could just as well have been used. There is also a word that bears a great importance although it is not very frequently used in either of the texts: trust. The next step will be a discussion around these nodal points. I will go further into the analysis, discussing how the discourses are achieved and maintained, and I will question the validity of the aforementioned nodal points. Are they as solid as we perceive them at first glance?

The Workings and Purposes of the Discourses

Choice they have. But choice within the range determined by the Prince that is a very different kettle of fish. It is not choice that matters so much as who determines and sets the bounds within which choice is exercised – as any supermarket shopper knows. (Neave 2002 p.193)

I find this quote not only vivid, but also very relevant for the coming discussion. There are of course a vast number of actors who have their own perception of quality assurance in higher education. Many of them surely have their way of coping with the workload it entails, of thinking and talking about it, of endorsing it and of complaining about it. Some of these actors even get involved in developing new strategies and methods, and take active part in trying to get their points through to their surroundings. They all have the full capacity to speak their mind, and to argue in favour of or against the systems available (see for example de Boer et al, 2002). These practices open up for the building of a socially constructed knowledge about QA, with many interpretations and perspectives influencing the whole:

If language use is socially shaped, it is not shaped in monolithic or mechanical ways. On the one hand, societies and particular institutions and domains within them sustain a variety of co-existing, contrasting and often competing discursive practices ('discourses' in the terminology of many social analysts). (Fairclough 1993, pp.134-135)

But what happens if only a few have the privilege to set the agenda for these discussions? O'Dowd (2010) argues that although the Bologna Process is not officially run by EU, it is still the European Ministers of Education who set the agenda for quality assurance and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Through the use of organisations such as ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU, a small group of people are put in charge of setting the agenda in a way that is congruent with the Ministers' agendas. Since these organisations are not made up by publicly elected representatives, but rather elected by the "next circle" of QA enthusiasts, it is never the public, or even the common academic or student, who participate in setting the agenda. They can only respond to it.

The various stakeholders (national agencies, academics and professionals, supranational bodies, institutional leaders and managers, national governments, industry and others) more or less seem to accept the developments taking place, and appear to prepare for the consequences. (de Boer et al 2002, p.50)

Language is a mode of action that is always socially and historically situated. While it is socially shaped, it also constitutes the social (Fairclough 1993). At the borderlines of every (order of) discourse, there is an opportunity for contesting the neighbouring discourse for hegemony. The aims of critical discourse analysis, as defined by Fairclough, are:

[...] to investigate how such practices [...], events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of

these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony [...]. (Fairclough 1993, p.135)

Under this headline I will try to look at the both texts simultaneously in order to see how they work with or against each other. I will address specific themes based on the nodal points identified previously, although we shall see that they are not as unambiguous when the documents are put together. What are the mechanisms in the two documents that are keeping the discourses alive? What pillars are part of constructing them? Is there a visible hegemony roof on top of the pillars of quality assurance in higher education? I will draw on theories concerning quality assurance, discourse analysis, the European dimension as well as auditing and trust (Power 1999, O'Dowd 2010, Harvey & Williams 2010, Filippakou 2011, etc.).

The Discourse of Europe – the Systems' Level

There is clearly a focus in both texts on the systems' level in higher education – not on the act of education as learning and teaching. This is to be expected, since these organisations have no jurisdiction to directly influence the curriculum within any of the sovereign member states or their institutions for higher education. They can, however, reinforce a discourse of higher education that is highlighting the systems' level and present the world with their version of 'the good system'. O'Dowd (2010) writes that the systemic re-structuring that came with the Bologna Process is bigger than any other change of higher education. Together with the much earlier started and wider project of creating Europe as a symbolic entity, through among other things the European citizenship in the Treaty of Maastricht (Ibid.), the EU member states subjected themselves to what we can call a new discourse of *Europe* – a new Europe that was to be characterised by border-crossing commitments and co-operation. The creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) seems in this context to be a natural step in the creation of a common sense-discourse of Europe. The synergies between EU and quality assurance have been discussed by others:

ENQA's development into its current status as a European-level policy maker is to a great extent a result of the European Union's policy of supporting European-level cooperation and transparency in the field of quality assurance. (Harvey & Williams 2010, p.27)

It is foolish in the extreme to think that the Bologna effect is limited only to the agenda, narrowly defined by those directly involved in it. As its name implies, a 'process' has the habit of insinuating itself elsewhere and encouraging others to fall in with the Heaven or Bologna sent opportunity. Such is the phenomenon of political mobilisation. (Neave 2002, p.193)

The paradox between state autonomy, on the one hand, and compliance to a supra-state discourse, on the other, also mentioned by O'Dowd (2010), makes it necessary for member states to comply from their own "free will" – as we could see in the ESG, there is no mentioning of consequences for not complying with the standards. There is, however, the implicit threat of falling behind and thus being left behind by other institutions for higher education that are willing to change according to the new set of rules.

The Distance Between the System and Education

In the sphere of higher education and its European discourse, there are not only systems on various levels, such as international, local or institutional policies, but also parallel systems for controlling these levels' systems. Two of these are of course the level of quality assurance systems, and the system for assuring the quality of those systems. By focusing, as in the ESG, on the systems for quality assurance and strategies for review-

ing QA agencies, the organisations establish a discourse within the area of higher education that determines how to speak about quality that has very little to do with the primary activities of the higher education institutions: education and research. Newton (2000) claims that interviews have shown that improvements in quality assurance can be separated from improvements in quality and enhancement of the student learning experience. Rather, the systems tend to bring forward a mentality of game playing – the academics become very good at filling out forms and knowing how to formulate a system-adapted answer.

Interviews pointed to [...] improvements in quality assurance as distinct from improvements in quality. Staff at all levels, from course team members to academic managers, associated the quality system with improved 'discipline' and 'technology' for validation, monitoring, and external scrutiny. [...] There is little consistent evidence in staff responses supporting the view that the student learning experience *per se* has been enhanced (Newton 2000, p.158).

The common sense within and between higher education institutions (at least on a management level) is that a stable and rigorous system for QA is necessary for the development of education and for student satisfaction (and thus for students wanting to enroll at their institution). Since the discourse feeds the overall assumption that you need these systems for quality assurance in order to be a successful institution, the question is what happens when you do not comply with them? Are there any *consequences*? In the texts, the word is not even mentioned, although they prefer to use words like *accountability* and *expectations*. Basically, it's up to each institution whether or not to comply or get left behind, a situation known as competitive emulation (O'Dowd 2010), a concept I will come back to later. Here, Power (1999) talks about an internalisation of inspection through systems – through the academia's internalisation of quality assurance systems, a normative climate of organisations is created.

The Built-in Competitiveness

One consequence, dependent on national and local policies, is the allocation of funding for the institution. If the system for quality assurance is considered unsatisfying by the QA agency, the institution might get their funding cut (Harvey 2005; Hjort & Sundkvist 2010). The downward spiral of less money and a bad reputation, fewer students and a decline in top researcher recruitment is a threat that is very sound, although it is not mentioned in the ESG nor in the OECD work on education.

So, I have claimed that the discourse of Europe is characterised by *competitive emulation*, a *struggle* between compliance and local autonomy and *the system as an entity* from which other systems are created and run. There is a fear of standing outside the inner circle. Elements that are controversial are actually some of the nodal points identified in the studied texts: *Quality assurance*, *European* and *Policy*. These are very central concepts that are required for the discourse to be intact. They are included in the texts and discussions in a manner of common sense, but there is an underlying uncertainty as to what the meaning of these words really should be. What should quality assurance achieve? Why is *European* a valid entity? On what level should a policy work, and what should it include? Filippakou (2011) stresses that the debate on quality assurance is a power struggle for a position from where one can impose their definitions of higher education:

[...] quality agencies through assessment have considerable power, and use this to influence the ways in which learning in higher education is understood. (Filippakou 2011, p.17)

This makes the systems' level one of the pillars in higher education. Next, we move on to the characteristics of these systems – how should they work? What is their purpose?

The Discourse of Cost-effectiveness – A Common Sense Future

Continuing on the notion of understanding higher education and the struggle to create a common sense, I shall now take a second look at the representations of competitive emulation within quality assurance in higher education, this time in the context of the cost-effective system and methods for assessment. Competitive emulation is often associated with Taylorism and other strategies to increase productivity. Basically, it entails rationalisation of work and bears within it the implicit threat of backsliding to the extent that the exceptional performance by the few leads to the expected norm for everyone (O'Dowd 2010). This concept of competitive emulation provides the backdrop throughout this part of the text. Let us start with a quote from the OECD work on education:

Ensuring higher quality, improved access and greater responsiveness, as well as facing closer scrutiny of the cost-effectiveness of strategies and policies, are some of the challenges facing the sector today. (OECD 2010, p.8)

As shown before, OECD is more of an economically focused organisation, and the notion of cost-effectiveness is therefore not much of a surprise. Still, it has a significance as to how the discourse in this document can contribute to the building of a common sense in a wider setting. The OECD document may be very different in character from the ESG document by ENQA, but is there any sign of the discourse of cost-effectiveness in there as well? The ESG (ENQA 2005) talks about an "adequate peer review system" (p.5), and that "Institutions should ensure [...] effective management" (p.7). In the instructions for QA agencies, the first standard point is that they

[...] should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines. (ENQA 2005, p.8)

The use of the words *adequate* and *effectiveness* do not in themselves imply any cost-effectiveness or economical perspective (it does not say what kind of effectiveness or adequacy). However, as it is put in context with the OECD document, my interpretation is that the ESG use of the words is consistent with the discourse of cost-effectiveness. In the text, the same recommendation (standard) applies to reviews of external quality assurance agencies – the presence and effectiveness of the QA processes should be taken into account. Again, we have a focus on the system, but we can also see that the focus is sharpened onto the *effectiveness* of the system in question. This is an indication of a more implicit, but still present, utterance of the discourse of cost-effectiveness. In the OECD text, the purpose of this cost-effectiveness is more explicitly stated as aiding society as a whole to develop:

Better management and delivery of tertiary education help countries achieve their economic and social objectives. (OECD 2010, p.8)

This reasoning is not present in the ESG, and thus there is still a small but important difference between the two documents when it comes to the discourse of cost-effectiveness: the cost-effectiveness of the systems themselves versus the cost-effectiveness of higher education as a provider of social and economic wealth to the surrounding society. This means that the discourse of cost-effectiveness in the OECD sense has implications for how you see the purpose of higher education and thus, in extension, the idea of curriculum content. The ESG part of the discourse, however, is more indirectly concerned

with these issues – they are implicit and the intention appears to be that reader should draw the conclusion that better systems create better learning experiences. Filippakou (2011) arrives at a similar conclusion as to the representations of the purpose of education in this discourse:

In spite of increasing openness, it remains difficult to escape the interpretation that the quality of teaching and learning is mainly to do with the transmission of skills, while higher education is understood as a means of promoting economic development. (Filippakou 2011, p.22)

Education's Effects on Society and Development

The focus on the secondary effects of higher education is perhaps more concrete to the public eye than the focus on the internal effectiveness of systems for quality assurance. However, measuring the internal effectiveness of a system can be done in a plausible way, given the structure of the system. The issue, however, is how to measure the outcomes of higher education when they are spread throughout society and are hard to identify. One way of measuring the outcomes for society has been to measure graduating students' achievements. However, there is also a resistance towards using student assessment outcomes as an indicator for the effectiveness of the institution. Harvey and Williams (2010) draw on the claims of researchers in the field and state that:

[...] reliable national data about complex student achievements are not to be had. This means that reliance on external quality assurance is unwise and that more attention should be paid to internal quality enhancement. (Harvey & Williams 2010, p.92)

Furthermore, the authors stress that:

[...] any consideration of student learning 'quality' is incomplete without a multivariate knowledge of how and why students engage with the context and content of learning, with the emphasis on learning processes and the factors that directly affect them. (Harvey & Williams 2010, p.94)

In short, one can argue that projects like OECD's AHELO⁸ are too simplistic to be seen as reliable sources of knowledge about higher education institutions' quality and students' learning experiences, as it only focuses on outcomes assessment and the potential future impact on society. If one is to measure the quality of an institution on the basis of students' assessment, one is confronted with the issue of grading systems. Although there have been reports raising the benefits of a pass/fail grading system with transcripts of achieved learning outcomes (Crossouard 2010), there is a strong resistance against it rooted in the public mind:

[...] however, in our 'assessment society', we remain 'as wedded to our belief in the power of numbers, grades, targets and league tables to deliver quality and accountability, equality and defensibility as we are to modernism itself'. (Broadfoot and Black 2004, cited in Crossouard 2010, p.248).

Taking this into consideration, Barbara Crossouard (2010) argues that the assessment of each student still relies on the judgement of the teacher. These judgements are not based on transcendental truths, but rather constituted within discursive norms and social conventions – and the communities of practice that set these norms are always contingent (ibid.). Crossouard also draws on Foucault, claiming that examinations and assessment are examples of taken-for-granted techniques of normalising judgements. Moreover, assessment does not simply reflect learning – it has a shaping and producing effect on learning as well:

8 OECD's project for International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes.

Assessment processes do not just 'drive learning' - they are deeply reflexive, contributing to the construction of learner subjectivities, as learners bend and respond to the demands of any assessment instrument and the wider assessment regime. (Crossouard 2010, p.252)

In a similar way, the assessment of this system-adapted learning is moved from assessing the learning itself to assessing the representations of learning:

In other words, the value attached to the signifier depicting the learning is becoming greater than that attached to the learning activities themselves. (Crossouard 2010 p.252)

In the same way as grading systems are focusing on the representation of learning, quality assurance systems can be said to focus on the student assessment outcomes instead of the learning that has taken place. In turn, the assessment of a whole institution has an impact on the work being done – we are back at the game of writing reports that present compliance to the system.

But in the Bologna Process 'learning outcomes' have been, in many respects, treated in a simplistic manner, where educational formalities, structure and transparency have been prioritised and discussions on contents, substance and pedagogical methods have been given less attention or have been postponed. (Stier 2010, p.347)

Kushimoto (2009) is critical towards outcomes assessment motivated by external demands, but highlights the importance of making the most out of a trend that seems to be lasting, with the AHELO project as the main reference. This is an example of a discursive struggle in working, where the ideological aspects of the issues at hand are still not settled into a common sense, or hegemony. Filippakou (2011) claims that this focus on cost-effectiveness and value for tax money is ideologically bound and reproduced within a wider discourse that makes the socio-economic results of higher education the main aim for higher education all in all. She claims that one dimension of this neo-liberal ideology that colonises higher education is the constant talk of employability in association with education and the Bologna Process.

For instance, student mobility is no longer conceptualised by the OECD in educational terms, but in economic terms – i.e., how to produce revenue from international education for universities in the member states by recruiting students in non-member states. (Stier 2010, p.341)

Employability is a concept that has grown from the Bologna Process to become a recognised factor when setting curriculum and evaluating education. Ulrich Teichler (2009) writes that the relationship between education and employment is a complex one, not properly investigated with today's statistical instruments. It has been argued that the surveys that are being conducted do not take into account gender, race and socio-economic background (Ibid, see also Harvey & Williams 2010). Other than Teichler, there are others claiming that higher education should not focus too much on employability. For example, Gibbs (in Harvey & Williams 2010b) argue that this focus distorts the virtues of being a student – if economic competitiveness determines what skills students should demonstrate, the range of educational purposes is limited:

When it becomes the meta-narrative for self, much of humanity can be lost. Individuals are more than the fragmented collections of qualifications; they are temporal beings in search of their authentic selves. A purpose of institutional education is to facilitate that process. (Harvey & Williams 2010b, p.97)

An interesting point adding to this discussion is that *employability* as a concept has not been warmly welcomed by academics in Sweden. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) is currently using the term *usability* instead to emphasise the diverse aspects of education and what it is good for, and in my interpretation to calm

opposition (see, for example, Hjort & Sundkvist 2010). Still, education is seen as a means, not an aim in itself in these discussions, although there has been talk about *bildung* from time to time on the Swedish arena for higher education, with the core arguments of academic integrity – higher education should not subside to the market's demands on new workforce (see, for example, Rosengren 2009).

The Aim of Higher Education Institutions

Although I have been talking about a discourse of cost-effective systems and maintained that higher education is subjected to neo-liberal ideologies and a fundamentally economic discourse, there is, however, a large difference between profit-oriented companies and higher education institutions. The aim of the higher education institution is not particularly an economic surplus, rather enough money to serve the final aim of being an institution with a good reputation and prestige (Reid 2009). Prestige means more funding for further improvements and guarantees a continued placing among the world's top institutions. Reid (2009) claims that there has been a colonisation in many public non-profit spheres (health care, education, etc.) by the discourse of management, due to a contemporary capitalism with economic, social and linguistic changes.

[...] ideological convergence in much of the world's higher education can be seen, where the new public management ideology has come to exert much influence on academia, adding terms such as 'global competitiveness', 'benchmarking' and 'sustainable development' to the vocabulary of policy-makers, university administrators, researchers, educators and students. (Stier 2010, p.340)

The discourse of management, or as I have called it, cost-effectiveness, is in the OECD document intertwined with the concept of development and *the future*. Both the ESG and the OECD texts describe a future where their standards and guidelines or expectations respectively are realised – they both try to make the future a nodal point with a common sense content; their version, so to speak. However, when we put the documents together we see that these nodal points are actually contested elements, still in the process of being defined. Although the future is never to be a rock-hard nodal point with one pre-determined content, there are many futures that we take for granted as they are told to us as common sense truths: more advanced technology, severe strain on our environment, the never-ending expansion of the free market – and the inevitable value of QA.

Agencies and Reviews – Trust and Recognition

I will now move to the inside of the systems of quality assurance and focus on their building stones. Agencies conducting reviews are an important part of the system, since the agencies are the ones doing the activity, the review. Or rather, the individual people within the agencies are conducting the reviews – a matter not spoken of in either of the documents. One part of the wider discourse of quality assurance is that there are no people. Bruno Latour describes this as bureaucratisation and claims that in a bureaucracy the persons within the organisation are made invisible (O'Dowd 2000). Once an element is regarded natural as an organism of its own, say, a state, a corporation or a culture, we cease to see the people working on it from within. There is no real organism, only thousands of individuals working on the illusion, creating files that refer to other files in an iterative chain of knowledge production. And knowledge production means power:

In our cultures, "paper shuffling" is the source of an essential power, that constantly escapes attention since its materiality is ignored. (Latour cited in O'Dowd 2000, p.37)

One very important factor within the context of agencies and review is *trust*. Power (1999) writes that, although it might seem that way at a first glance, a society with extensive audit systems is not by default a society without trust. There are rather cycles of trust, corresponding to the levels of systems I have discussed earlier, which in short means that instead of trusting the institution to do their job accurately, there is a higher instance for auditing this work (agencies), which in turn needs to answer to external audits from other agencies. Each level of system thus equals a cycle of trust. The immediate insecurity, or lack of trust, is avoided by investing trust in the next cycle (ibid.). Turning to the ESG, we see a promising belief in the impact of the standards and guidelines, as they claim that "The mutual trust among institutions and agencies will grow." (ENQA 2005, p.6). The issue, as stated before, is only who has enough trustworthiness to end the addition of further cycles. For how long is a quality assurance agency trustworthy enough? The discourse of agencies and review has this built-in paradox which is temporarily solved by instructions (standards and guidelines) for at least three levels of quality assurance work (internal QA at institutions, external QA of institutions by agencies, and external QA of agencies). Of course, the use of a *gatekeeper* as expressed in the ESG is one way of actually determining who is trustworthy enough to decide which agencies are suitable or not (ibid, p.6). This gatekeeper is an Agency Register Committee working to build a register of approved agencies. This provides us with a conveniently vivid picture of how the discourse of agencies and review is guarded – a wall surrounding the discourse with guarded gates. Since there is only one way of getting in – using a certain vocabulary and complying with the standards and guidelines – the discourse is protected from interaction with other ideologies and kept safe. The establishment of a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education as a meeting point for discussions around quality assurance (ibid.) is constructed for the purpose of providing a forum for discussion, although in reality only those complying with the discourse are likely to be welcomed or to participate. I will, however, come back to this forum for discussion and its characteristics later, since, after all, not all on the inside are "believers".

Intentions and Consequences

So, are there no positive consequences following the implementation of quality assurance systems? Harvey and Williams (2010b) give an example from an institution where studies show that the positive results were more rigorous course approval procedures, increased awareness of students' perspectives on learning and teaching, and an intensification of pedagogical debates. On the downside, however, are some issues that are previously recognised: excessive bureaucratisation, increased administrative workload for academics, a non-creative formalism and lack of trust due to excessive monitoring with punitive characteristics.

These themes of bureaucratisation, administrative burden, stifling of creativity and lack of trust have been recurring concerns ever since. (Harvey and Williams, 2010b, p.103).

Nevertheless, there *are* always good intentions behind reforms – even though these intentions might be completely invalid to some groups of interest⁹. The Bologna reform

⁹ Indeed, the intention could be world domination, but that would still be a good intention for those in power. It's all contingent.

and the discourse of quality assurance that grew with it had as one of its goals to empower students, which is probably why student unions have been positive to the development so far. Power (1999) claims, however, that this good intention easily is turned into a disservice:

In this way, audit expresses the promise of accountability and visibility to these stakeholders. But this promise is at best ambiguous: the fact of being audited deters public curiosity and inquiry and the users of audits are often just a mythical reference point within expert discourses. Audit is in this respect a substitute for democracy rather than its aid. (Power 1999, p.127)

This is in congruence with Fairclough's (1993) notion on critical discourse analysis as a means to investigate how the opacity between society and discourse can be explored as a factor securing power and hegemony itself. In order for the system to maintain itself, it is necessary that participating organisations, like student unions and higher education institutions endorse the system. Since they were positive to the potential outcomes, endorsing the system at the beginning, they are obliged to further comply with the system. These actors are then expected to self-monitor their opinions about the system, since they need to be consequent to be taken seriously. This is where we arrive at Foucault, however briefly. A concept known to most social scientists is *panopticon*, which is incorporated in Reid's (2009) analysis of the characteristics of quality assurance:

The value placed on self-auditing is congruent with the panoptic effects of auditing, whereby the auditee comes to self-audit. (Reid 2009, p.352)

The moving towards a panopticon is not very surprising, since the external reviews' motives are to look at the organisation's internal system for self-inspection – the self-audit process within the institution (Power 1999). Power asks what the stakes are when inspection and external audit collapse "into a quality assurance function, an audit of arrangements for self-inspection" (ibid, p.131). A part of the answer would be that audit and self-audit becomes a normalised process of analysis, creating a common sense notion around the concepts of what should be audited (the system) and who should audit (the next cycle of trust). In this way, we give in to the stress that appears from our mistrust, and to suppress it we invent places (systems) where to keep it. What Power claims is ultimately that we try to manage risk through absorbing it into risk management programmes, or more specifically for this study, quality assurance systems.

[...] audit has put itself beyond empirical knowledge about its own effects in favour of a constant programmatic affirmation of its potential. Can anything be done to correct this? (Power 1999, p.142)

Systems Fit for Purpose

Not only is the system reinforcing itself in this cycle of trust and mistrust, but the aims of the system are also lost when the system's purpose becomes being fit for audit, instead of being fit for teaching and learning. In the ESG, one of the emphasised aims of the standards and guidelines is that:

The consistency of quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will be improved by the use of agreed standards and guidelines. (ENQA 2005, p.6)

The aim is, in other words, to have a comparable and consistent *system of quality assurance*¹⁰ within EHEA. The struggle to define common sense, or create hegemony, is visible here, although it is vital to remember that this is still on a pure level of quality assurance systems, not the teaching and learning itself. The implications for teaching and

10 As differentiated from a comparable and consistent system for higher education.

learning, due to the creation of these systems, are not the objectives for this study, although the literature suggests that little has changed in this area due to QA (see, for example, Kushimoto 2009).

The systems for quality assurance need not only to be consistent between institutions, but also *fit for purpose*. In the standards for external quality assurance of higher education, item 2.4 states:

Processes fit for purpose: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them. (ENQA 2005, p.8)

The key here is that still it is only the processes for quality assurance and their internal objectives within the system – not teaching and learning – that are mentioned. Power (1999) warns that being fit for audit is not the same as being fit for the purpose of teaching and learning, let alone facing the needs of society. How do we determine fitness for purpose, then? This leads to the issue of accountability, and what the institutions and agencies actually are accountable for.

Accountability – And the Power to Escape It

A central driving force for creating systems for QA is to establish what each party should be accountable for, in order to create transparency and predictability. The ESG document itself is a part of this process to distinguish what agencies can expect from institutions and vice versa (ENQA 2005). The OECD document is in a similar way stating what the organisation believes society should be able to expect from higher education institutions and higher education itself (learning outcomes) (OECD 2010). By expressing the organisations' expectations, they put themselves in a position of being able to define the accountability of others. Each organisation's general success in maintaining impact and influence within the field determines the response to those expectations. The reasons for applying accountability are ideologically bound to each organisation and their motives:

Finally, the way societies call individuals and organizations to account says much about fundamental social and economic values. Power is this ability to demand accounts, to exercise control over performance, while at the same time remaining unaccountable. (Power 1999, p.146)

These structures of power and accountability are contingent – they could just as well have been put in another way in a different discourse, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. O'Dowd (2010) puts forward the notion that not only are the institutions and agencies forced to take a stand for or against the systems for quality assurance and the accountability for cost-effectiveness that it entails, but since it is all done by the process of competitive emulation, the institutions can be said to have done this voluntarily, thus leaving EU and the organisations acting on EU's behalf within higher education without any responsibility for their part of the deed.

The aim of demanding accountability from higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies would presumably be to enhance education and research and make sure that every institution is doing their best. However, as pointed out earlier, there is no automatic translation from accountability to quality enhancement, and the results on education from the methods for measuring quality remain uncertain (Kushimoto 2009). Kushimoto writes that demands on accountability for public money, especially in times of a financial crisis, leads to more emphasis on assessment of learning outcomes due to

external demands. Thus, we are back at outcomes assessment and their questioned effect on education in itself:

Nonetheless, it is obvious [...] that interests in outcomes assessment come from the aspect of accountability rather than improvement. This gives us to predict the difficulty in connecting outcomes assessment to self-review which aims to educational improvement. (Kushimoto 2009, p.592)

Summary

I have identified two discourses in this chapter: the discourse of Europe (the systems' level) and the discourse of cost-effectiveness. These are of course overlapping, as we have seen, but they are rather reinforcing each other than providing areas of contestation and critique. One can draw on Fairclough's concept of *orders of discourse* and picture a wider order of discourse that is higher education, the inner circle of this discourse being quality assurance, and within this we find the discourses of Europe and cost-effectiveness. Within, or maybe rather between, these discourses are the concepts of accountability and trust, as well as actors such as agencies conducting reviews. The meaning of these concepts gain strength from the connections with the surrounding discourses.

These concepts manifest the pillars of quality assurance, supporting a hegemony of ideologically shaped truths about higher education. These truths include the view on education as a means to ensure economical and societal development, the idea that institutions need to be graded (in order to be ranked), and the threat of being left on the outside when the gatekeeper at the fence of market economy and neo-liberalism decides it is time to close the gate.

The discourses identified in this study are all products of interpretation and therefore contingent, like any structure. Thus the reader is left with her or his own good judgement as to whether or not the conclusions below are plausible. I have tried to show the implications of power and the use of common sense-building that are part of creating these discourses and keeping them at a high level of influence. In the process there have been many researchers influencing my ability to see various aspects of the texts, aspects that may have been overlooked otherwise. In the same sense, I am confident that there are several aspects and layers of ascribed meaning to these documents that have gone by unseen. These are hopefully subject to inquiry in the future.

Conclusion

A text is never stable, but rather changes whenever it meets the reader's eyes (see, for example, Allen 2000). My reading of the ESG and the OECD texts are influenced by the theories presented by other researchers, but in the same way these theories have shown themselves to me dependent of my other experiences and of course dependent on my readings of the analysed texts. A person never has just one role to play. My roles while working on this study have been a student(-union representative), a co-producer of the discourse, an education major and an EU-citizen. Depending on the part I choose to emphasise, my discussion will not only arrive at different conclusions, but these conclusions can also be regarded as more or less valid. Is the fact that I am an education major providing the reader of this thesis with valid critique on my intrusion in this field and the methods used? Am I as a student regarded as the most valid source of insights as to what higher education should be, or am I "just a student"? Or should the reader regard me as an EU-citizen, who in that capacity is in their full right to demand accountability from policy-makers?

The Ideology of Quality Assurance Discourses

Filippakou (2011) claims that there are five characteristics showing when ideology is present within a discourse: naturalness, loss of voice, partiality, unequal distribution of power, and social struggles. These turned out to be applicable after arriving at my results presented above. I will use these characteristics to structure my conclusions in order to make out the ideological implications for each pillar holding up the discourse.

Naturalness: The System is the Only Way

In a discourse that is ideologically governed, there is a tendency towards naturalness. This means that the values within the discourse are perceived as natural and therefore not questioned. Filippakou (2011) draws on the example of quality assurance in the UK and claims that although the resistance in the early 1990's was hard, academia today is starting to internalise its values. How do the ESG and OECD documents contribute to this?

The ESG conveys a naturalness in the way it is written – an authoritative voice comes from the text being produced institutionally rather than by persons. It depicts objectivity since its contributors all have agreed on this final, perfect version. The result is presented as coming from a debate in detail by expert organisations (the civil persons within the organisations remain invisible). Potter (2005) speaks about the construction of an "out-there-ness":

In other words, they construct the description as independent of the agent doing the production. More specifically, these procedures draw attention away from concerns with the producer's *stake* in the description – what they might gain or lose – and their *accountability*, or responsibility, for it. (Potter 2005, p.150)

In this way, there is only one way of reading the document unless you want to start your own investigation in order to arrive at other conclusions, and that is to read it as if it is the best possible common sense (Filippakou 2011). Hence, there is no real alternative that says "if you do not comply, things might just work out anyway".

Crossouard (2010) stresses the importance of keeping the issue of criteria and the construction of learning itself open to critique:

[...] in the longer term, an unintended consequence of outcomes-based assessment used now across educational sectors and in many different international contexts could be to 'portray to students the idea that the specification of standards and outcomes is a given and that learning only proceeds following such a specification by others'. (Crossouard 2010, p.251)

This shows that the naturalness discussed here is not only concerned with the mere systems for quality assurance and the demands for accountability. Rather, it has implications for the definition of education generally, and the purpose of education specifically – not only for students but for academics, employers and society at large. When issues like these are naturalised into having one pre-determined answer, what happens to the critical thinking at our institutions for higher education? Does the naturalness of the system as it is presented in the texts function to mute criticism ?

Loss of Voice: Becoming One of "Them"

Naturalness and loss of voice reinforce each other within an ideologically grounded discourse (Filippakou 2011). This is manifested in the discourses of quality assurance through two parallel processes: the successive loss of resistance, and the need for those on the inside to defend their position towards the slowly declining resistance. Once you enter the discourse of quality assurance and comply with the standards for assessing QA systems, you are automatically linked to the discourses of Europe and cost-effectiveness that work within it. When entering the wider discourse of QA, you need to show your compliance with the system. By doing so, you also subscribe to the ideological characteristics that are underlying the discourse – the market economy, the focus on systems' level, etc.

This phenomenon has been described by Althusser (in Jørgensen & Phillips 2008) as interpellation. To take it down on a subject level, the persons on the line are often QA officers who are made subjects within the quality assurance discourse (or ideology). Hence, they become bound to certain limits in their space for action. Jørgensen and Phillips (Ibid.) argue that the Althusian interpellation is limited in the idea that there is an ideology that hides the true social relations. Rather, they claim that there are no true relations to be uncovered and that discourses assign positions for the subject in each situation – in this case a QA officer is expected to endorse the systems for quality assurance, and stay true to the ideology in order to be able to get their co-workers at the institution to co-operate. But this also implies an over-determination of the subject, since the QA officer is clearly also a co-worker. In the same way, there is a tendency for student representatives working with QA to internalise the role as an insider, while at the same time trying to stand on the outside and be critical. However, this is made impossible due to the fact that the student unions endorse the Bologna Process and the quality assurance work being done in higher education – once you are on the inside you cannot step outside. This is manifest in the tendency among students to talk about the same things as QA workers (as discussions within ESU are compared to Harvey & Williams 2010b). Students also tend to be on the same side as administrators (rather than academics) when it comes to assuring quality and creating rigorous systems for accountability¹¹.

Another illustration of the loss of voice, is the transition when you enter the discourse through the gates. From the outside, the language used and the processes discussed

¹¹ At my institution, the work of QA administrators is even said to be assigned by students.

seem overwhelmingly absurd. Trying to acquire a voice in order to enter the discussion (possibly with the intention of being critical), you take on the work of becoming literate in the discourse at hand. By doing so, you not only acquire the language, but with the language comes assumptions as to the nature of the issues discussed – the ideologies within the discourse become common sense, and in order to be part of the discussion, you cannot drift too far away from the main stream. Again, student representatives on QA boards are likely to go through this transition in their struggle to be part of the decision-making process, just as administrators and academics who want to make a career within higher education management.

So, are there no critical standpoints being voiced within the discourses of quality assurance? Earlier, I mentioned the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education as an arena for discussion. Of course, not everyone attending these forums have the same opinions – there is rather a vast variety of interpretations and suggestions for improvement. At the EQAF in Lyon 2010, there were several speakers who criticised the ESG and the quality assurance culture – although it was mostly done in a way as to keep the discussion within the discourse. Instead of critique towards the discourse and the underlying ideologies, there was a critique as to how higher education institutions act upon the ESG, and how to make sense of quality assurance. Thus, we are still within the discourse, although on the edges, and still within the boundaries of the underlying ideologies saying that QA, transparency and accountability are necessary. There is no questioning of the purpose of education. Stier (2010) argues that the absence of discussions regarding the purpose of education is keeping the discourse intact:

By the same token, to an insufficient extent the Bologna Process concerns non-commercial aspects of higher education. For instance: little in the Bologna Process focuses on ‘fostering’ citizens with critical mind-sets towards ideologies, institutions and policy-makers. Why is there so little room and very few incentives for a critique of the economic order and hegemonic ideology? Probably because this would mean that the Declaration itself would become the focal object of such criticism. (Stier 2010, p.347)

In providing the actors with an identity connected to the ideologically grounded presumptions of the Bologna Process, they lose parts of their voices that are not in compliance with the naturalised ideology. Thus, only reinforcing voices will be heard. Stier continues:

Also, the Declaration’s focus on the ‘European dimension’ is not primarily an attempt to bring in more of Bildung into higher education; instead this is a part of a large-scale identity project, aimed at establishing a stronger sense of community among Europeans. In other words: higher education does not only aim at educating people about a sense of ‘Europeaness’, but wants to construct such a sense. (Stier 2010, p.347)

The loss of voice works through a naturalised partiality. When the outcomes of a discussion are pre-determined, there is no use to argue and actors within that discourse lose their voice. This pre-determination comes from the mind set of the ideology – and the partiality that it entails.

Partiality – in Favour of Neo-liberalism

In the process of naturalising values within a discourse, leading to a loss of voice, there is also partiality. The ideological implications that the discourses grow from are by definition not neutral. The political agenda of OECD is explicitly partial towards the market economy and neo-liberalism, while the agenda of the ESG text is more implicit – it does not openly confess to one political agenda. However, it is incorporating con-

cepts that have their roots in the same ideological presumptions; competitiveness leads to cost-effectiveness, and a cost-effective system is a good system. In order to be competitive, institutions for higher education need to be transparent and comparable – a justification for launching reviews and accreditation processes, as well as students' outcomes assessments. Stier (2010) argues that the rhetoric surrounding the Bologna Declaration is a clear example of this instrumental outlook on higher education:

Ideologically, a common denominator for the Declaration is its emphasis on the relevance of higher education for the labour market, its competitiveness in a global academic 'market' and, related to this, the economic potential of education and of knowledge per se, something which Lyotard (1984) discussed 25 years ago. (Stier 2010, p.342)

The naturalness, loss of voice and partiality together create a common sense-hegemony that covers the whole higher education sector, incorporating it in the market economy discourse. However, identification with the market economical values and strategies are in contrast to the fundamental ideologies of higher education, which is supposed to be critical and politically neutral. If the OECD wants to spread the values of the market economy throughout the world, it is not surprising that the principal institution for critical thinking is a sound target for conquest.

Unequal Distribution of Power: Mistrust and Accountability

The discourse of quality assurance in higher education contains a naturalised distribution of power. This distribution is far from equal, as there are some actors who have the power to set the agenda, whereas other actors merely have the power to react. As argued before, the privilege to set the agenda can also entail the privilege to demand accountability. This is where the institutions for higher education, who have been slow and robust organisations throughout centuries, in one heartbeat are forced to adapt to the fleeting whims of politics in order to claim their *raison d'être*. Handing over the future of higher education institutions to quality assurance agencies who are then dependent on other agencies or accreditation from the state authorities, creates cycles of trust, and the question is where to end this spin:

Several critiques of current HE practice can be made [...]. Firstly, the importance of the experiential makes problematic the extent to which the specification of learning objectives and task criteria can be relied upon to make assessment systems 'transparent' and accessible. As Sadler (2005, 192) notes, attempts to define the meaning of 'a sound level of critical thinking and discrimination', only create further questions about what soundness entails, leading to 'new verbal terms that in turn call for more elaboration, and so on in infinite regress'. (Crossouard 2010, p.251)

In the same way, Heyneman (2003) warns that detailed and rigid frameworks bring corruption – the more standards for transparency, the bigger the temptation to play the game of formal compliance. Basically, it entails presenting oneself in a certain manner in order to look better in the reviews.

There is one more aspect of the power to set the agenda, and that is the power to decide who gets in, past the gatekeeper of the discourse, and who is denied access. In this way, not only the agenda is set, but also the participants are selected on the basis of their compliance. This selection helps to keep the discourse intact, and at the same time threatens to make it too stable, on the verge of stagnant. This power provides a hierarchy where higher education institutions answer to QA agencies, and QA agencies answer to the European Register Committee, which in turn acts on regulations provided by

the E4-group and Ministers of Education. The unequal distribution of power, and the sudden shift in where power lies, reveals struggles between different actors in the field.

Social Struggles – the Various Aims of the Actors

In the field of QA in higher education, I have found struggles between various groups in society. These struggles are not physical or explicitly fought, but implicit and very much dependent on the power relations within the field. The actors are, on one hand, organisations trying to set the agenda, and on the other, individuals trying to eliminate the over-determination of their subject in order to be able to "get to work" instead of spending all time endorsing or down-talking the system respectively. In what directions do these actors strive? The issue of who has the power to set the agenda returns. What are the aims of these actors? Heyneman argues that:

The natural tension between speedy response to demand and technical standards might have analogies in any production process. (Heyneman 2003, p.320)

The issue of Heyneman's argument is how the World Bank has been endorsing vocational education at the cost of academic education, and generic skills such as critical thinking. Similar to the case of OECD, and also within the E4-group, there are not many education experts, but rather economists (even though, in the case of the E4-group, the people are from varying academic backgrounds). The professional composition of these organisations help to create the economic discourse that has developed into Neo-liberalism and the identified discourses within quality assurance in higher education. But education does not necessarily lead to development, as Heyneman (2003) stresses. He argues that the World Bank is caught in an economical discourse and does not have the competence to handle education matters. I would claim that the same argument is valid in the case of OECD.

Reflections

Below, I will give some further reflections on the outcomes of this study in respect to my various positions as an overdetermined subject within the discourse. I have presented the elements that build this discourse – making up the pillars and supporting the hegemony. I have also shed light upon the ideological grounds these pillars grow from. So, what are the consequences from my point of view? I will go into these reflections as student, co-producer of the discourse, education major, and EU-citizen. These identities have, of course, influenced my conclusions, and these reflections are a way of revealing my personal thoughts after conducting this study. The main theme that can be drawn from this reflection is that higher education is changing, and that the ideological underpinnings are not only naturalised, but even internalised, among students and academics.

From a Student Perspective

The students entering European higher education institutions are not a homogeneous group, but rather a mix of different socio-economic backgrounds, values and wishes. In order to be able to embark on the endeavour of higher education, which will cost you time, effort and a loss of income from a "real job", you need guarantees that your education will pay off. You need concrete outcomes that will increase your employability. In a competitive world, students cannot afford spending time learning without a clear objective, just for the intrinsic value of education. In this sense, many students are co-pro-

ducers of the discourses of Europe and Cost-effectiveness – especially on the note of fearing to fall behind on a job market that is extremely competitive.

It is my experience, that as a student, you need to speak the language of education management, in order to have influence over your education. This is fostered through student unions in order to empower student representatives to make a difference. Yet, is the critical perspective that students through their unions can bring to discussions undermined in this process? As argued before, one part of gaining access to a discourse is the incorporation of underlying presumptions of the nature of things. If you work hard to enter, and then become locked into the system, how can you remain a critical counterpart? Is it even feasible for student unions to work for a more *bildung*-inspired education if the majority of students want all resources to be spent on increasing employability?

Another aspect of being a student in these surroundings is the works of politics. From discussions with other students, from all over Europe, it has become clear to me that there is an awareness that some things need to be masked in order to get into the policy documents. The wordings of documents such as the ESG is a contested area of education politics, but when consensus is achieved, is there no more chance to raise your voice against it? The discussion among students (and QA officers) seems to go in the direction of a need for a revised edition of the ESG, rather than a critique on the existence of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the first place.

As a student, starting out before the Bologna Process, and finishing my studies within this new system, I have seen these discourses gain grounds. Students around me want competition, comparable grades, and closer relations to the job market during their studies. I cannot claim that this is generally applicable, but it is there. The capitalist hegemony that covers not only higher education, but indeed through education is provided with power, sets the agendas of society, policy-making, you and me. Will the market economy's most powerful minority govern not only the material world, but also our minds? Education is power – curriculum is ideology.

From the Co-producer Perspective

As co-producer of the discourse of quality assurance, both as a student representative and through writing this thesis, I find it overwhelmingly thick. In order to influence the direction for where higher education is going, we need to regain our lost voices. How great is the power to influence, from the positions on QA boards, as student representatives, members of review teams, and higher education institution managers? Is there any room for resistance in the peripheral grounds of the discourse? Only if there are critical voices, the project can be seen as a democratic one. If not, it is a dangerous endeavour, since there is only one voice and that is the one of the market economy – or more precisely, the OECD. I would argue that the space for resistance is very small, and declining each day as the hegemony gains power. A capitulation to the *realities* of the competitive market outside the education sphere has spread and the only way to stay in business seems to be to play by the rules of the neo-liberal market economy. The space for refusing, and still being able to survive, has become no man's land. In my interpretation, this is an example of the market economy setting the agenda for higher education. This is where marketization of higher education is the only *real* alternative – hegemony is created and maintained through competitive emulation.

Why would anybody even consider working with quality assurance in higher education, especially with the contested consequences on actual education? My reason for taking part in this work is clear: it is fun! Not only do I, a student, get to be part of managing an institution for higher education, but I also get to be part of a community. As co-producer of the discourse, I am a small piece in a huge machinery, operating all over Europe (and beyond). Through my commitment I gain importance, and identifying myself as a co-producer provides me with a *raison d'être* within the groups of this community. By graduating, I will lose the privilege to work on this level of decision-making and huge systems as a student representative. My identity in this respect will be lost, and this is my only worry when finishing my studies. In other words: while I am on the inside, I am somebody. What happens when I exit?

There are, of course, critical voices raised against the concept of quality assurance and its implications. But it seems like these voices, if strong enough, are mostly calling from the outside. The question is how far you can go within the discourse without being thrown out? Being too critical towards a discourse that is common sense to the majority, undoubtedly discards you as not being serious, or as a mere pessimist. I do not claim that every co-producer within the quality assurance discourse is lacking a personal sense and interpretation of the discourse, but I do claim that the doubts and critiques are not voiced enough neither within the discourse nor to the surrounding potential members. If QA officers would show doubts towards the concept of audit in front of (usually already critical) academics about to fill in a self-audit report, what would the consequences be? If student unions stopped demanding systems for transparency and accountability, what would their members think? This protection of the discourse is pragmatic in the way that it ensures continued hegemony and shows a strong consensus towards the ones on the outside. Yet, as any board member knows, the outward consensus is usually a better one after a lively discussion within the group. Closing the discourse of QA to dissidents is undemocratic and risks stagnation.

From the Education Major Perspective

What happens when students and academics no longer are expected to be critical? How will institutions for higher education stand against ever-changing demands from the economy on the qualifications needed by students who enter the workforce? I have argued that the demands from the ideologically underbuilt discourses of QA are changing the way higher education institutions work. The slow moving universities have been around for centuries, simply because they do not rise or fall with politics. They are supposed to be sanctuaries for critical thinking and free minds – is this a place for the ideology of market economy? Of course it is, as long as it is not prevailing on its own, but incorporated within a discussion of ideologies of politics and economy. The marketization of higher education, however, brings severe consequences to society at large. When students and academics stop being critical towards an ideology, and accept its premises as truths, it becomes the truth for higher education.

I have touched upon the issues of teaching and learning throughout the text. I have also declared my basic view on education; I claim that education has an intrinsic value that should not be suffocated by the demands of the market. If we do not keep our higher education institutions as incubators where minds can grow more sophisticated and analytical, there will be no one to identify new solutions to society's problems. More im-

portantly, there will be no thinking for the sake of thinking, no discussion for the sake of discussion, and no learning simply in order to quench curiosity and to grow as a person.

Apart from 'giving' professional skills, [...] the role of higher education is to assist students in developing competencies to understand themselves, other people and society. Ideally, academia should foster interculturally competent (Stier 2003), interculturally sensitive (Bennett 1993), critical and globally responsible individuals (Gacel-Ávila 2005). (Stier pp.344-345)

What are the implications for teaching and learning in the discourse of quality assurance? Students and teachers catch on quickly. They comply with the standards they need to meet in order to pass a class, or to pass a QA review. In the USA and UK respectively, educators have reported an increase in compulsory schools' training for passing standardised tests (Thrupp & Hursh 2006). Instead of learning about our world, pupils are trained to enhance their skills in taking tests. The grades, test scores, or other representations of learning (such as writing self-audit reports) become central means for employers, governments and prospective students when measuring education quality (ibid.). The introduction of competitiveness in education forces teachers to hand out higher grades in order to place higher on rankings (Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). The commodification of higher education turns students into customers and brings a mentality of entitlement – I pay for this education and I expect a high grade. The fear of bad student feedback forces teachers to practice "safe learning", not encouraging students to take risks – in turn risking the trust between student and teacher (ibid.).

From the EU-citizen Perspective

Being part of the community that ESU provides for European student union workers, I feel more and more like an EU citizen. The identification with *European* is a large scale project that the Bologna Process is one small part of, as discussed earlier. Being a European means taking in the collective history of our continent as my own history. It means subscribing to European values and social construction of knowledge. Recently, there has been an emphasis on the *European dimension* within higher education, and I have to admit that I, especially in the role of a student, have stopped defining myself as primarily Swedish, but rather as European (the world has to wait a little longer I guess).

What implications does this identification have, and for whom? How is this European identity shaping higher education? It is definitely shaping our minds. Students expect to (and are expected to) travel the world and study in different countries, without the inconvenience of transferring grades in a lengthy manner. In taking on higher education as a target for Europe-level policy-making, the mandate of EU becomes ambiguous. Education has previously been declared a national matter (O'Dowd 2010), but the borders do seem to be blurred. This would not be a problematic development if it was not for the similar blurring of the democratic appointment of EU-level decision-makers. As an EU-citizen, I do not know how the ones in charge are elected, or their jurisdiction. Moreover, I do not elect the President of ENQA or OECD. Developing a European identity means accepting governance from invisible policy-makers further from the citizens.

Closure and Further Research

How legitimate are the OECD's and the E4-group's visions for the future? Are these visions based on democratic processes? Do these organisations act on research-based recommendations, or do they follow the common sense of the hegemony of capitalism

without questioning the further implications it has for higher education and its future? Stakeholders and decision-makers should ask what their objectives are and what policies they should endorse, because I do not think that all of us benefit from the movement towards a marketization of higher education.

In the construction of the hegemonic discourse on quality assurance, a number of dichotomies are apparent. These are: Stakeholder vs. Decision-maker, Accountability vs. Trust, Quality assurance vs. Enhancement, Academic freedom vs. Management, National independence vs. European policy-making, and finally Fitness for education vs. Fitness for accreditation. To what extent do these dichotomies function to maintain the discourse and hide the ideologies of QA? Is it feasible to assume the presence of a large number of dichotomies are a weakness or a strength?

There are many questions that I would like to be able to answer, and even more that I would like to ask. However, the scope of this thesis limits me. Hopefully, this study will be a contribution to the wider project of critical investigation of the forces at work within the sphere of higher education. By taking a closer look at the seminal policy documents of quality assurance in higher education, I have been able to bring the ideological grounds for the discourses at work into light. I have shown some of the values that guide these documents, and I hope that I have contributed to questions being raised in the arenas of quality assurance in higher education. Future research, and policy-making, within the field needs to consider the ideological grounds that influence higher education today, and question the future outcomes.

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