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# Supercomplexity, risk and the unknown future: an interpretation of quality assurance under recent educational reforms

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## ***Abstract:***

*In reflecting upon Ronald Barnett's notion of supercomplexity, this paper examines the synergies between it and recent reforms to the tertiary education sector in New Zealand, so that some comment may be made regarding the role and nature of quality assurance within contemporary higher education. Given identified similarities, this paper provides a philosophical analysis of how the role of quality assurance may realise the stated ideals. It is proposed that a particular conceptualisation of risk is a foundation for the attainment of these goals. Drawing from Barnett it is argued that risk is not a specific type of activity, but is instead a particular disposition that should imbue the actions, speech and reflections of those charged with quality assurance.*

***Keywords:*** *risk; freedom; quality assurance*

## **Introduction**

What is required of quality assurance practices under the new reforms in the New Zealand tertiary education sector is not explicitly discussed in policy documents. It is proposed in this paper, however, that, as recent policy appears to be founded on distinctly different ideals than those of the last 15 years, there is a need for a corresponding shift in how aspects of quality assurance are conceptualised and undertaken. The task of interpreting this approach is the aim of this paper. It is argued here that reflection upon the ideas of Barnett, particularly a discussion that identifies the synergies between policy and Barnett's notion of a radically unknowable world and supercomplexity, avails to us a perception of the required philosophical foundations of quality assurance in the contemporary environment. An understanding of Barnett's work, therefore, fleshes out some of the challenges required for quality assurance in the context of the proposed reforms.

## **Recent educational reforms and supercomplexity – broad synergies**

In the policy documents of the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission and the New Zealand government since 2000, there is evidence of a fundamental change in the way the government perceives the roles and responsibilities of the tertiary sector and the nature of its

graduate. At the heart of the reforms of the 1990s was a demand for quantity – quantity of certification, ‘providers’ and qualifications. Quality was often considered synonymous with quantity, and the more qualifications on offer and students to access them, the greater contribution tertiary education could make as an alleged economic panacea. The ideology underpinning these reforms has been the subject of a protracted debate. This debate in New Zealand brought forth accusations of ‘commodification’, ‘marketisation’, ‘operationalism’ and ‘instrumentalism’ – all notions found in Barnett’s own criticisms of similar moves in the United Kingdom.

Under the new reforms, the ends and means of previous ideologies have been rejected (TEAC, 2001b, p.17; New Zealand Government, 2002b, p. 4). In their place the value of tertiary education has been extended far beyond the economic to encapsulate qualities such as “good citizenship”, “social development”, “environmental sustainability” and “infrastructural development” (New Zealand Government, 2002b, p. 8). Tertiary education is now oriented towards national strategic goals such as a “healthy democracy”, “personal well being” and “institutional collaboration” and “strategic alliances” (Maharey, 2001, p. 4; New Zealand Government, 2002a, p. 10). The apparent ‘mistakes’ of competition and duplication have been recognised.

In relation to the responsibilities of higher education, there are clear parallels between the new reforms and the ideas of Barnett. Under the new reforms the tertiary education system must:

- “be cosmopolitan
- move beyond institutions
- be guided by the principles of collaboration not competition
- seek to critically reflect and meet the goals of all in society
- enable virtual organisation and delivery
- build links across and beyond institutional barriers
- exploit new technology
- be oriented to exploit synergies
- enable transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches
- develop new partnerships
- support creativity across all disciplines and practices
- be daring, confident and forward looking
- promote freedom of speech
- undertake criticism, risk, debate and dialogue
- be responsive to the needs and desires of the community” (TEAC, 2000, pp. 16-19; 2001a, p. 12-14).

These ideals reflect Barnett’s claim that higher education must continue to provide society with what it always has – the “reflective” component of life and learning (1997a, p. 178; 2000, p. 69). Thus institutions assuming such a role retain both the task of production of insight (through research that responds to societal needs) and reflection (through a pedagogy of challenge, contestability and critique). Rather than acquiescing to the narrow foci of “consumer” demand and economic productivity realised through competition (New Zealand Government, 2002a, p. 3), higher education is being challenged to provide a broader engagement – economic as well as “citizenship”, “environmental”, and “social and cultural development” (New Zealand Government, 2002b, pp. 9-10). Higher education is seemingly charged under these reforms to confront and meet the challenges of a society constituted by difference and conflict, and to respond with actions and ideas that critically engage and celebrate this diversity.

The nature of knowledge and of our ability to know the world under these reforms appears to have parallels with the work of Barnett (1992b, p. 29; 1994b, p. 18; 1997a, p. 88; 1997b, p. 29; 2000, p.166). By stressing “contestation”, “fragility”, “innovation” and “creativity” (New Zealand Government, 2002b, p. 10), it appears the reforms are underpinned by a world that requires a diversity of values, opinions and paradigms. These attributes and activities are to be won by students through an awareness of difference, engagement with conflict, and a search for collaboration across disciplines, incorporating “transdisciplinarity” and “technology” (Maharey, 2001, pp. 5-7; New Zealand Government, 2002b, pp. 52-56). And in echoing a central tenet of Barnett, this collaboration must be brave enough to “engage” with the context that higher education exists within, an engagement that crosses institutions, industries, modes of communication and national borders (Barnett, 1997c, p. 170; 2000, pp. 99-110; New Zealand Government, 2002b, pp. 17-19). This suggests a world of flux – not to be constrained and ordered – but rather critically engaged and augmented.

The graduate at the heart of these reforms has, not surprisingly, also many parallels with the ideals of Barnett. According to policy documents, this graduate is “creative”, “critical”, “innovative”, and “entrepreneurial”, has a state of “well being”, and is “collaborative” and “connected” (TEAC, 2000, pp. 6-7). This is therefore, a critical person in the realms of knowledge, action and self-reflection and one whose engagements span the epistemological, economic, social, individual and international (pp. 12-13). Hence these reforms signal an ontological shift towards a mode of being in which students can exist within all spheres of life in a meaningful way so as to ascertain for themselves what counts and thereby contribute to our broader understanding of values. This mode of being encompasses a reflective and productive ability in different spheres of society, personal well-being and interpersonal care.

### **Risk and quality assurance**

Unlike the reforms of the late 1980s and 1990s in which the key ideals of ‘quality’ were observability, measurement, efficiency and effectiveness – all traits that lent themselves to clear quantitative evaluations – the contemporary desired traits of higher education suggest QA qualities of risk, challenge, innovation and conflict. This implies we have reached a point of epistemological rupture, a paradigm shift, in our conceptualisation of quality. This change requires more than simply new modes of measurement. Instead, the nature of the ideals themselves requires a fundamental change in our perceptions and understandings of quality assurance. This is because quality assurance – the nature of policy, procedures and interpersonal contact – often sets the parameters and scope for academia’s experimentation and innovation. The current demand for graduates, teaching and institutional responsibilities of the ilk signaled above, means that the work of academics must take on a much more radical and innovative edge. This kind of role is not an ‘option’ but rather the core business of higher education. As such, all facets of quality assurance – and the boundaries of acceptability that they define – must also (quickly) evolve. This section presents an interpretation of what the author considers to be a philosophical foundation of this evolution.

### ***Objectification and potentiality***

It is argued that this change should be conceptualised as a change in emphasis in quality assurance from objectification to potentiality. These concepts were used by Martin Buber to explain two different kinds of relationships. Barnett’s notion of “becoming” has a very similar meaning (1994a, p. 110; 1997a, p. 109; 2000, p. 101). Objectification (I-It) for Buber is a relation between a knowing subject and the object of inquiry in which the knower attempts to stagnate the sense of becoming. This object of inquiry can be a knowledge claim, aspects of

experience, or another knower. It is a form of engagement that is exploitative through its attempt to shape or construct the volition of the other and the other's "interrelationships" within the world (Buber, 1937, p. 39). Potentiality (I-Thou) is the antithesis of this disposition. It is an engagement that seeks to understand the "relations" that a person or object exists within and, in entering into these relations the other becomes part of a much wider context that he or she seeks to augment (1947, p. 98). Thus potentiality is thoroughly relational, and in encountering the real nature of this relation, is open to ignorance, doubt and ongoing flux. It has as its highest value hope, the freedom of the self, and the unknowability of the future. It is a relation that challenges others to reflect upon the conditions that structure their place in the world, and in so doing, experience the existential freedom of choice and the responsibility one has for the choices that are made.

These two opposites are helpful in understanding the challenges facing quality assurance in the contemporary environment. The role of higher learning, the stated ideals of graduateness, and the implicit and explicit assumption of what is required from teachers and pedagogy, suggests the notion of potentiality has a significant place in higher education today. This sensation of the incompleteness and becoming nature of our relationships focuses our activities towards the "unknowability" of the future (Barnett, 1992b, p. 15), the possibility of empowering projection, the contestability, contingency and historicity of current paradigms (1992a, p. 8; 1994a, p. 64), and the humility and ignorance of our current condition (2000, pp. 35-58). On the other hand, a will to objectivity impels one to construct relations so that the world is known, orderable and measurable. It is an approach that cuts short potential in favour of the subjected, the finished and the observable. In the work of Barnett this relation has been described as operationalism and its critique is the primary focus of *The Limits of Competence*.

### ***A brief history of risk***

Potentiality and objectification are, however, terms that do not fit easily into the discourse of quality assurance. Although their meanings are of the utmost importance, the term *risk* is instead adopted in this paper as it has a history in quality assurance and a broader affinity for those working in academia. The concept of risk, as developed in this paper, does not denote particular processes of planning or management, but is rather a *disposition* of the quality assessor as he or she engages with policies, procedures and people. There are of course many forms of risk and the history of risk demonstrates that its nature largely depends on what we need from the future and our possibility of influencing what is yet to become (Bernstein, 1996.). The concept of risk which is argued should be at the heart of our activities to realise the ideals of the reform has two key components – the experience of freedom and the embrace of a future unknown. It is argued that these two components stimulate the kind of risk that is, in part, required for meeting the demands of supercomplexity.

It should be noted that this notion of risk is imbedded in a disposition towards the unknown and is not a process necessarily underpinned by either risk-management processes or rationality. The problem with risk management is that it attempts to foresee all possible factors surrounding a transaction. This is a form of risk first introduced to Western society during the Crusades, through the Arabic knowledge of Hindu mathematics. While civilizations of the West had used numbers before this time, they were not used, nor did they have the capacity, to calculate and foretell the future for navigation, astronomy and commerce. It should also be noted that the workings of Western societies had, up until this time, little "need" for these subtle, complex forms of calculation, being largely agricultural, ruled through divine right, and defined within the limits of religious orders (pp.18-19).

The introduction of complex probability mathematics allowed Renaissance Western society to take far greater risks. The growing ability to calculate the future – and hence order the unknown – was taking place at the same time as the rise of humanism, which increasingly saw in the present and future a place for human volition. In this environment, the status of gods to define choice and station was being challenged through society's ability to explore and hence overcome the 'magical'. The result was that Western societies became more interested in the future as their need to project and plan increased. However, the overwhelming need to control the future and exploit potentiality through calculated risk, was brought to fruition by the advent of capitalism. Capitalism brought to fruition societal structures, systems, communications, and modes and means of operation that *needed* to order the future. Success and failure became dependent on a level of information hitherto unrequired for society. It was capitalism that saw everyday survival (gain *and* loss) as dependent upon an ability to 'know' the needs of tomorrow.

But this kind of risk – alone – cannot suffice for the necessary conditions of what is required for contemporary higher education and quality assurance. Rather than being a will to potentiality, the systems of probability that dominate this notion of risk are largely attempts to order, construct and determine. There are three reasons why this form of risk cannot in itself meet the demands of higher education as outlined in policy and informed by the work of Barnett. Firstly, these forms of risk management are decisions based on information acquisition. It seeks to 'know' all the variables. While this process might work for some projects – those underpinned by the measurable, orderly and complete – it is not sufficient for the creation of imagination, difference, conflict and the unfinished. Secondly, the approach to risk undertaken in the name of reason or rationality cannot find purchase in higher education because what counts – in terms of overarching values, methodology, outputs – is highly contested and rarely agreed upon. And thirdly, it is psychology that has shown us that rationality does not govern risk-taking. One's willingness to risk is linked to very personal experiences, ideals, history, culture and context. Studies demonstrating the failure of invariance, house money effect, prospect theory and ambiguity aversion, have all shown that risk is rarely a process underpinned by sensibility, reason, or understanding. Instead choices of risk are the result of hunches, intuition and often contradictory instincts (Bernstein, 1996, pp. 269-283). The evidence of these sorts of choices has been shown to escalate as the complexity of the risk increases.

These studies and the history of risk therefore show two things. Firstly, the reasons why one takes risks are intimately related to the way one perceives the future and what one requires of the future for the present. Secondly, how one takes risk or is emboldened to risk is not simply a matter of calculation or reasoned reflection, but is related to the broadest ideals and experiences of the individual and his or her immediate culture and context. This field of research demonstrates the import of interpersonal relationships and experiences of trust in encouraging others to risk.

### ***The experience of freedom***

Given these considerations, it is proposed that risk in quality assurance needs to be conceptualised alongside, but also beyond, 'risk-management'. What is proposed is that risk is a characteristic of a *disposition* constituted by a will to potentiality. This disposition challenges us to continually and critically engage with the relations of those who we work alongside. These 'relations' are those connections between persons, between the person and policy and procedure, between the person and their immediate departmental culture, and between the person and his or her ideals, anxieties and hopes. In these contexts the will to potentiality searches for an understanding of these relations, enters into them, and attempts to

augment their empowering possibility. This final quality is the most important. Without it the will to potentiality could be synonymous with awareness, empathy or understanding. The qualities of both reflection *and* projection bring to the environment the element of risk – the overcoming of one’s current condition. Thus it is projection that is pivotal in conceptualising risk from these other attributes.

It is proposed here that this projection is underpinned by two fundamental characteristics: the experience of freedom and an embrace of the unknown future. In relation to freedom, it is argued here that this is an experience of choice as a result of reflection, discussion, analysis and critique. This experience may be oriented to questions about what counts as quality, excellence or value, or to the procedures and practices that are prescribed to attain such qualities. In an environment of supercomplexity, these questions cannot be ignored or reduced to some form of dramaturgical compliance (Barrow, 1999). Instead the process of quality assurance must be underpinned by a willingness to question and explore the needs and ideals of value for a time and place, alongside the admission that these qualities are contingent, and subject to ongoing reflection and change. Such questioning can only exist in an environment of freedom in which all parties experience the space to critically engage with prescribed aims, ideals and processes.

The provision of freedom, however, does not permit an attitude of ‘anything goes’. In fact, quite the opposite, it is the experience of freedom, rather than the demand for compliance to ‘objective’ standards, that brings to bear an intense demand for individual responsibility. As already stated, if quality assurance is to reveal the needs and necessities of particular epochs, places and peoples, and provide for them, then those working in each context must be afforded the necessary freedom to reflect, critique and project new activity. But this allowance brings with it greater responsibility; for the choices made, and their consequences, become the responsibility of the individual, and the individual community. Thus responsibility for the values, the processes that attain them and the procedures that evaluate them, become, to a greater extent, the responsibility of each tribe within the institution.

### ***The unknown future***

The basic premise of this paper is that risk needs to be an embrace of an unknown future, but the future of a society such as ours, under the demands of a global capitalist economy, is becoming more and more congested. Thus there is a demand to excavate the unknown and rekindle the space that confronted the ancients. This kind of risk – an embrace of fundamental unknowability – is essential in contemporary quality assurance because the world of supercomplexity requires, possibly more so than ever, ongoing reflection and critique that seeks to overcome the present and form new, more enlightening alternatives.

To keep up with these evolutions, and provide meaning and critique for society, higher education must be brave enough to make the leaps necessary to access these evolutions, bring them under new perspectives, and forge radically new understandings. Thus risk, if it is to realise the nature of changes that might be required in higher education and society, needs to have a future that is not only radically unknowable but also fundamentally unknown. Without this unknown element – a space beyond our knowledge project – critique, challenge and change can fall to the demands of instrumental reason, founded upon and reduced to specified and measurable goals that meet the demands of the present. This form of projection is on the one hand an objectification of our freedom to choose, and on the other, a process whereby the unknowability of tomorrow is restrained and constructed by those conditions that seek to reproduce the power relations of the present.

What is proposed therefore is that risk requires a perception of the future that is not only unknown, but also constituted, to an extent, by a space that will be subject to our projection. In the environment of risk in which freedom and responsibility are experienced, so must there exist the provision for space and the unknown. Quality assurance – as the boundaries of value and practice in an institution – must construct this space and reveal it to academia. It is this provision – the experience of the unknown future – that allows the critical and fundamental imagination required for supercomplexity. Thus quality assurance can no longer be a simple bureaucratic, administrative task, but a psychological endeavour as well, in which our relationships avail the experiences and sensations of critique and innovation.

## Conclusion

Of all the fields within institutions of higher education, quality assurance is probably the most problematic area in which to imbue speech, relationships, activity, policy and procedures with a sense of risk. This is a result of a history of quality assurance founded in an epistemological and ontological paradigm that celebrated objectivity, detachment, policing and compliance, and considered risk an anathema to its core activity. Tension is also the result of quality assurance *needing* to take the lead in meeting the demands placed upon higher education. It is quality assurance and management systems that often have the defining limit in terms of what practices and principles constitute the notion of ‘excellence’.

But the ideals stated in recent policy documents and the broader considerations of our condition must be engaged and realised within the institution. Quality assurance will have a role in meeting these demands and an aspect of the method required to do so has been suggested in this paper. This suggestion is that those charged with quality assurance imbue their actions, speech and writing with a sense of freedom, contingency, space and fragility. By so doing a dialogue is created in which others may develop a disposition of creativity and imagination. This form of interaction – whether on the level of interpersonal or practice or policy – is one that purveys a sense of openness through questioning and fundamental critique. It is this openness, sense of freedom and fragility of our ideals and practices that has been conceptualised as a disposition towards risk – a movement towards unknowability through a will to potentiality that keeps bringing the focus of academia’s work back to reflection and the promotion of freedom and responsibility. It could be argued, therefore, that the current reforms, which stipulate a series of new ideals for higher education and the nature of the graduate, have accentuated the challenge of quality assurance to walk the tightrope between the ‘known’ and radical unknowability, and between the will to objectivity and potentiality.

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